CERBERION

Misty Nite

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Sophia's Death

The land of Caledonia is located at the very eastern edge of the continent. It is barren and made almost entirely of dust, limestone, and rocky terrain, except for a few tall, icy mountains. The small settlement of Shev lies in the far north of the country and stands out from the general picture of Caledonia. It is a modest lowland town, cut through by a sluggish river, greenery, and monotonous concrete buildings. The residents of Shev often call it a city out of respect and habit. However, its development, economy, and population growth are nowhere near what would indicate that it is a city, and the term "town" is a compromise nickname by which the inhabitants of Shev do not wish to admit that it is in fact an ordinary village, and that they themselves, the people of Shev, are nothing more than villagers. If someone were to tell them, "there are fine potatoes in your village," they would frown and hold themselves proudly as if rural life were something very offensive. To the people of Shev, over the past twenty years, being a villager had become something shameful.

The people of Shev, like the Caledonians, as the inhabitants of the land of Caledonia are called, had very unusual observations. Although the country had mostly been part of the traditional East, even the conservative Southeast, old, high moral values were no longer respected. No one knows exactly when this happened. Whether it was after the civil war, after inflation, or the revolution, or even after the introduction of democracy in Caledonia, was not entirely clear. It may be that all these troubled events together caused such a strange condition which had already become almost natural. In general, although the cause was unclear, it was noticeable that some unusual and long change had occurred, after which the Caledonians woke up different, quiet, and darkened.

However, Shev was an exceptionally beautiful town. Above the calm, shimmering river that cut through it, during the hot days of May, a thick and warm mist seemed to rise. Along the river, by the promenade, the white and pink lilac, the linden trees, or the clean, rainy air carried a particularly strong fragrance. Winter dawns, when a thin, fairy-like layer of ice formed on the surface of the water and delicate frost settled on the evergreens, looked like scenes from Russian novels. For kilometers beyond Shev stretched long, thick, carefully cultivated wheat and enormous yellow sunflowers. Nowhere in Caledonia was nature as magical and abundant as in the little town of Shev.

Yet Shev itself, in those years of which we speak, was sinking into scarcity. Throughout the entire town, despite the abundant harvests that favored it, there prevailed a kind of melancholy, forced calm. The citizens appeared particularly sluggish and apathetic, although that deceptive appearance was, at its core, like a stretched slingshot that lacked only a pebble to explode in anger.

The industrial zone of the city, that is, the town, was neglected and haunted like a settlement in ghost films. Reddish, rusty machines and moldy walls were covered with greasy dust and soot. A silvery, thin cobweb had settled over the gray and brown deposits. There was no glass left in the windows, and some walls were already overgrown with weeds, fungi, and moss. Everything stood completely still and lifeless, as in graveyard silence. In summer, the town baked in the sun, while in winter it was stung by fine, sharp snowstorms and swept by the northern wind. In short, Shev was decaying.

The working people of Shev had sunk into poverty and did not know how to move from that dark point. There were only three or four enterprises that woke each morning, but even there there was more administration than proper work. Each of these companies dealt with trade and the stacking of paper envelopes. The workers resembled bicycle riders who tired themselves greatly by turning the pedals, yet, because of some flaw in the bicycle mechanism, the wheels turned slowly and out of sync with the rider's effort. Thus the rider, like every employee of the firms in Shev, spent his energy and strength for a long and discouraging time only to fall behind. Add to this that he did not even know where he was going or why he was moving, and the catastrophe was complete. This broke the troubled spirit of Shev and was probably decisive in making this town, despite its Eden-like blessings, resemble a ghost town walked by dead souls.

In the year when Shev almost completely collapsed economically, nature was more beautiful and more generous than ever before. The fertile, noble ears of grain grew almost a meter high, the corn was particularly large and sweet, and even the corn silk, though useless, was silky like the hair of a porcelain doll and glimmered more golden than before. That very year, the Tuesday of May Day was warm and fragrant. The late afternoon promised an evening that existed only in Shev, fresh from the river and intoxicating with the scent of flowers. It seemed that only the people of Shev and those who had seen the hot river of Shev knew what the color white smelled like, exactly like lilac and in no other way. That very first of May was supposed to be the first free day since the beginning of spring for Sophia Vlac, yet she nevertheless, without even knowing how, found herself that morning in a gray office.

Sophia Vlac, born in Shev, worked in the administration of one of the four firms in Shev that called themselves successful. She was a completely ordinary twenty-six-year-old girl, beautiful, intelligent, but cold, withdrawn, and rough. She was usually called

unsociable or a tomboy, by which people meant that her mind was masculine, not her body. Her body was obviously feminine and well-shaped. Her face was pale, with ancient aristocratic and delicate features, at once superficially pleasant and deeply charismatic. In short, Sophia was a very attractive girl who was also literate, articulate, and hardworking. On the surface, although nothing could point to any particular exceptional quality in her, nothing could point to any special flaw that might disfigure her either. All of this probably stemmed from her normal, ordinary, and uneventful life. She came from an average family in which there were no quarrels, and her childhood had therefore been peaceful and healthy. Also, her withdrawn nature had always been present, like a trait given at birth, and therefore she did not indulge much in adventures. She found it difficult to find common ground with others, and thus tended to avoid them, which caused her to remain throughout her life perceived as calm, unremarkable, and dull.

Yet lately, sadness and fear had persisted within her. The fear and sadness had not arisen from external events, but were instead a way of experiencing things that seemed to have come from nowhere and to have formed without cause. Such malignant and persistent feelings could not be cured by wise advice, could not be treated with punishment or discipline, nor had they arisen as a result of spoiled behavior or some similarly mocking name for love. Nothing in Sophia's calm and ordinary life could have resulted in such a rapid and grand development of sadness and fear. These two demons simply existed, lived within her, had separate desires and a will different from her mind. However, since they were quiet, perfidious, and skillfully hidden like separate wise souls, no one noticed that Sophia was not as ordinary a girl as she appeared.

That Tuesday in May, tired and distracted, in an office that lacked only bars on the windows to illustrate Sophia’s complete spiritual defeat, she scribbled something on a piece of paper: a kind of open crooked circle, one end of which stretched endlessly into the interior of the circle, forming a spiral resembling a snail’s shell. When the crooked swirl of her drawing disappeared into invisibility, she let out a heavy sigh. She had been deeply sad for months. That gray administrative prison was to blame for everything.

And indeed, the firm, with its overall atmosphere, resembled an administrative prison. Flat, uniform walls only reinforced the depressing gray paint. Mornings were the worst, especially the moment when serious suits collided on the stairs and greeted one another:

“Good morning, Yakov Petrovich.”

“Good morning, number 5241,” the distinguished Mr. Petrovich would reply.

Thus the suits greeted one another every morning out of forced and unnecessary politeness, creating an atmosphere of nausea that only good and very dark humor could break. People did not greet each other, nor did they even notice one another; they were there only to wear those suits which, in fact, performed the work themselves regardless of who put them on. Sophia could not decide whether the building was uglier with those black and dark blue suits inside it or without them. In any case, it was ugly and equally unpleasant to the eyes and the spirit.

On top of that, the walls of the building were full of bugs as large as a thumb, with long red horns. The bugs bred in hidden places, and under the wooden paneling in the office walls one could often find entire nests, bodies and larvae of four hundred to five hundred bugs piled together. If a nest were disturbed, the bugs would scatter or die, but their offspring would remain protected in their cocoons and resistant to poison. These insects simply could not be eradicated. They were slimy, adaptable, and skillful. There were many of them, but they usually kept out of sight. When Sophia strained her ears, she could hear them crunching and rustling through the papers and the raised plaster, and it both disgusted and frightened her.

Since the problem of the bugs had been long and persistent, Sophia received a telegram order that Tuesday: on Sunday, May twenty-fifth, at ten o’clock, it was necessary to arrange a meeting with the extermination committee in order to finally eliminate the insects. Also, on the same day, another hour was to be set aside for sorting papers, and yet another hour for… the message continued endlessly. Someone clearly did not understand that a day lasted twenty-four hours. The message ended with the phrase “with respect,” although respect was a common Caledonian occurrence only on paper.

A sudden surge of anger and a pounding heart pulled Sophia out of her dull sadness. Another hour… what was that? And another hour… nothing. What did it matter? What was one more hour compared to all the hours that had been taken from her, compared to a crushed life whose dreams had been wiped away like dust by some unseen force?

Her head fell into her hands. Her expression was hidden between fingers damp with cold sweat, but it was terrible and ghostly. It was as if she had just heard the sentence of a long imprisonment. For her, this office was exactly that: imprisonment. For her, everything outside that office was close to a prison as well: all expectations, moral commands that no longer had anything to do with the original idea of morality, everything someone else wanted that she herself had to do.

She could not fit in. What she was, in the full depth and passion of her being, was not what this world wanted. The foretold future was perfectly clear. Her whole life would be like this. Not a single hour would remain for her to squeeze out what pressed inside her soul, to paint or to write a naked human being in naked words, not even an hour to feel a naked human being with her hands. How was one supposed to live without all that? In fact, the question was not how to live, but why.

At times she was angry with herself, at times with the entire world. They were all stupid, what did they know? If only all those days, all those hours, her whole life had not been taken from her, she would create and live. After all, who even works on Sundays? Only in Shev did people work both Saturdays and Sundays. Only Caledonia was a colonized land of slaves.

“If that is so, if you do not love me and do not see me, then I will not even try,” she grew angry within herself like a child. “Let me be bad, then, let me be! If those who drain your souls are good to you, then take them!”

After that, self-hatred would impose itself upon her, and she would sink into an even more dreadful state, a state of sick and constant fear and self-defeat. Because of that fear, all her anger and all her sadness remained inside her, tormenting and killing her, while she answered the trampling of others quietly and gently, even in a whisper. If only they were all animals, then at least it would be clear, the stronger would win. Or if they were all human, then they would behave like humans toward one another. But they were neither human nor animal, instead they possessed the worst of both kinds, human awareness and animal ruthlessness.

This was Caledonia, a centaur-land, a sluggish and dark place where, instead of the human head and mind, the head of the beast ruled. This was a land where mindless animals ruled, and people, wise, good, and sensitive, died under the teeth of a maddened bull. This was a land where oxen harnessed humans to pull the plow.

Sophia both loved and hated Caledonia. If only the town of Shev were in another country, ah, how beautiful it would be, how its May would flourish. Instead, its heart had been torn out, just like hers. She felt as if everything had been taken from her, as if that, that which she no longer knew how to name since it was no longer life, that existence lived on someone else's account, no longer had any meaning. Here, in this cursed land, even a living person was dead. She stood between the earth and the underworld. This existence between the world and hell tormented her deeply. She wanted to spit it out, to vomit it up with disgust, because it was tough, bitter, poisonous, unbearable. She wanted only time.

Of course, she received this administrative imprisonment. All of it was nothing. Everything was nothing, she was nothing. To herself she remained nothing, even when for others she was everything required: wonderful, successful, and beautiful. It was a formal beauty, an existence without purpose, success without happiness, life without life. She decided to end that torment the very same day. She would collapse into the irreversible, she would jump into hell, into the devil’s hands, straight into the grasp of the very one with whom she had signed this ridiculous contract of slavery.

“All of this must end, I must not wait for another false dawn. It is over… today it will be completely over,” she whispered. One of the hardest dilemmas, to betray or to be betrayed, was decided in favor of the underworld. And without any connection to her character, the decision came suddenly and irrationally. Madness decided on its own.

Sophia went down the stairs and entered the restaurant. She remembered that she had not had time to eat breakfast that day. From the kitchen came the smell of fresh lamb and fried young potatoes. Sophia was not interested. She had not eaten for a full twenty-four hours, yet she did not feel hungry. She only wanted to drink one last coffee. She ordered a strong coffee without sugar and with milk. It seemed as if the storm inside her had never even existed. She was happy that everything would soon be over.

A large, shiny bug crawled across the table. Sophia remained still, although she was very afraid of those bugs. The waiter approached, placed the coffee on the table, and crushed the bug with his fist.

"Ah, there are so many of them," he muttered. "The world is full of them. We will never eradicate them, no matter what we do."

Sophia nodded in approval. The peace of her last coffee was the only thing she wanted at that moment, and these comments and conversations seemed unnecessary to her. However, that peace was soon disturbed by a column of striking workers passing by the firm. The group of strikers was noisy. A brightly made-up woman at the neighboring table spoke loudly:

"Ah, just imagine, Ivan, just imagine… these people…" she continued, pointing her finger at the strikers, "…haven't been paid for eight years. They themselves don't understand how they haven't starved to death. Today one should be happy just to have a paid job, even if they force you to pick cotton. And when I hear those office rats complaining, I feel sick, Ivan."

Sophia thought the woman's voice was unpleasant and shrill. And on the radio there was some dreadful song about love, a man, and chocolate. She became restless. Her hands began to tremble again. She brought the cup to her lips, letting a hot black drop spill onto the floor. She took a sip and frowned, her lips and forehead tightening. There was no milk in the coffee. Her last coffee laughed in her face and mocked her with its bitterness.

Sophia stood up and pushed the table forward. All the guests looked at her, but she no longer saw anything. Darkness surprised her with its assault, yet she could not resist it. She was half-conscious and senseless. She was left breathless, she tried frantically to catch air, and with her inhalation, indistinct sounds began to come from her. She trembled and cried in terror, not noticing that tears were falling, nor that unclear sounds were coming from her mouth. She looked around and made out various familiar faces, yet she could not remember them. She saw their astonished, respectable expressions beneath greasy cheeks and the occasional double chin on which tightly knotted ties barely rested.

A living person was something strange to these people. They did not associate with living people, only with gentlemen. Because of that, Sophia's outburst seemed very ugly and rude to them. And the more she feared their judgment, the less she could control her darkness. Fear quickly overwhelmed her completely, her left hand jerked uncontrollably, and her heart seemed to burst through her throat. A heart attack.

At that very moment, the waiter roughly threw his tray onto the counter, and the girl who had been pouring beer dropped the mug into the sink. Sticky, black malt spilled down the counter all the way to the tiles, while the bartender anxiously called for an ambulance. The waiter held the unconscious young lady, lightly slapping her face in an attempt to revive her. He shouted, "Please, water! Someone bring water!"

The general director and his young assistant stood aside, hands in their pockets, commenting on the scene.

"Look at that. She doesn't want to work, so she's pretending," the assistant commented. "They've spoiled her too much. What problems could she possibly have? She doesn't even have children. What would she do if she had five hungry mouths and no rights like those people in India and other countries of Africa? Her boyfriend must have left her. These young girls are all the same. They don't like a dress and they immediately start crying. No one tells them they have a nice hairstyle and they cut their veins! A disgrace, a disgrace to their parents. Who throws themselves down in front of such respectable people? Look over there, the sales director. Is one supposed to faint in front of him? I tell you, all such women should be beaten. They should be married off to someone, then two or three strikes on the backside and a slap, there would immediately be peace in the world. And sex, that's what they need. There's no 'no,' what kind of 'no' is that? As if she knows what she wants and what she doesn't. She finished school, read two books, and now she thinks she understands life. I would send them to work in the fields, or on construction sites, then they would see what it's like."

He spoke like that for some time, keeping his effeminate hands in the pockets of his gray jacket, occasionally taking out a handkerchief. With it he would polish the badge attached to his lapel that read "general assistant."

The director was not even listening to him. He did not know what to do from fear, and his head was full of various important calculations. He feared the reaction of the owner of the firm and the public. Ah, the media would surely say that she had been sick and depressed, but the people, the people would know exactly what had caused the heart attack and what had killed Sophia Vlac. The people always know everything.

Philip

He had not gone to bed, nor did he wake like the rest of the world. This awakening of Philip's drenched him in sweat, even though the May night was calm and pleasant. He opened his eyes and grabbed his weakened head, then his arms, legs, and chest, as if trying to check whether all his limbs were still there. He lay with his flushed cheek pressed against the cold edge of the bathroom tile. It was another fainting spell, another nightmarish pursuit, another excursion into hell. His head was split somewhere at the left corner of his forehead. He raised himself, very confused but already considerably more conscious. He washed his face with icy water, impatiently waiting for sobriety and memory to return. Feeling that his face was still dry, unbearably dry, he hurried his movements in panic, splashing himself with water until his lips turned numb and bluish.

Four years had passed since nightmares had last tormented him. This new fainting spell meant only one thing: it was happening again. That dream again. Those fiery eyes again. Him again.

The dream, at first glance, was shapeless. In it appeared a dark beast without a clear form. This apparition, which had haunted his dreams for ten years, filled him with fear and a chilling premonition. He was convinced that it came from the other side, from another world of darkness and underground rivers, and that it wanted to draw him into a game of madness and hell. The obsessive nightmares did not last long, usually only for several months before disappearing as if they had never existed, but what troubled Philip was their flirtation with reality. Sometimes, while awake, he would hear giggling, indistinct speech, and screams, or he would sense a suffocating smell of acid and ammonia. He was certain that all of it was somehow connected to the apparition that haunted him in nightmares and which he feared to exhaustion.

Philip remembered, immediately after the dream, the fiery eyes of that shapeless nightmarish beast. Sometimes its silvery teeth or claws would clearly appear in his memory, sometimes it had parts of insects or reptiles, but for the most part it had no clear physical form. The only thing that was always visible, bloody and hungry, were its distorted eyes with tiny pupils. After the dream, Philip would clearly remember the terror those eyes caused him, and he would become afraid to the point of panic, to the failure of the muscles in his arms and legs, and finally to the loss of consciousness.

Long after the fainting, he would feel a kind of stirring and stabbing sensation in his legs that would make him jerk while reading a book or watching a film. He was also tormented by insomnia and by many thoughts about the apparition that pursued him. On this third of May, Philip's forebodings were stronger and more tormenting. He shivered although he was not cold. He felt pains in his stomach without any cause. He was more restless than usual, yet his face had taken on a certain expressionless coldness, as if he had drowned his soul in the sweat of these nightmares.

Awakened and cooled, Philip felt as though he knew who the beast was and why it came in such a fatal and threatening form. He feared what his unconscious mind already knew very well. The nightmare was, in fact, a premonition of misfortune. That dream was an omen. Something terrible would happen. Wondering what, he burst into childlike tears. The fear of the shapeless thing that devoured him tightened his throat with a deep and dreadful sorrow.

The shapeless thing that chased Philip in his dreams was his strict secret. He skillfully concealed the dark face of his nightmarish nights from everyone, even from those closest to him. Mihael Jasenovski, Philip's best friend, suspected that something was happening to that unusual man. Philip's girlfriend, Sophia Vlac, endured her own inner chaos. Her love for Philip was the only distraction she had left since she had taken the repulsive, slave-like job in the Shev office. Because of that, she wanted to keep that love in her imagination, in some distant paradise where everything was beautiful and possible. It was as if she could not and did not want to see Philip's strange mental nightmares. Mihael and Sophia were the only ones who sensed something unusual. In front of everyone else, Philip kept his secret perfectly. His everyday behavior did not differ much from that of other people.

His exceptional genius and talent only helped him and made his deceptions easier. He lied excellently, almost with psychopathic perfection. Besides that, Philip was very handsome. He had a strong and harmonious young body, smooth skin, and a face with regular features. His strikingly black hair formed an ideal contrast with his pale eyes. His lips were very full, and his nose small and well-shaped, yet this did not diminish the pronounced masculinity of his rough face. He was tall, with an upright and proud posture, and no part of his body deviated from the historical ideal of male beauty. It was no wonder that society accepted him. Beauty deceived and lied so well, in the way only

beauty can. Precisely because of that beauty, people, and especially women, easily forgave all the conflicting emotions that stirred within him and surged with the malice of an unhappy man, which were the first and obvious signs of a diseased spirit.

Philip himself knew a great deal about his illness. It was some affliction of the spirit that suffocated most of his feelings and desires. He was numb and without will. Because of that, to Philip the entire life of an ordinary man seemed like a stupid, forced lie at which he scoffed. It could not be said that he was incapable of feeling, but everything that was born within him, without any cause, would soon suffocate on its own in a clear numbness. Day after day, it was as if he were walking through an empty labyrinth of single-colored walls. His light blue, sunken eyes, pale face, and dark hair were the very embodiment of his inner coldness.

He did not care much for either his friend Mihael or Sophia Vlac. It could not be said that he did not love them, but that love was neither tender nor beautiful. He knew how to irritate and torment his friend, and he often cheated on Sophia. From the very beginning of their passionate relationship, in which nothing was lacking, Philip sought other girls, not for relationships with them, but because of the malice he needed to vent on someone. Although he could be terribly unpleasant, not even knowing whether it was connected to his illness and hallucinations, Philip was not entirely without conscience.

It could be said that two impulses were most pronounced in him: fear and malice. His malice was usually childish, harmless, and seemed like a mixture of pride and envy. Other people’s happiness hurt him, yet, out of pride, he never acknowledged it. Belittling everything was his sweet amusement. No one was spared. He would attack anyone and anything. In anticipation of each new fear, suffocating in the living sand of his dark secret, he often felt that malicious urge for which he neither knew nor sought a reason. He did not fight against it. He simply became spiteful and cruel. He became angry and rough.

Yet these traits could not define him as a person, because he sometimes performed acts so just that even a saint would be ashamed before the purity of those deeds and feelings. He could be the best man the people of Shev had ever known, and he was capable of heroic actions that ninety percent of people, out of selfishness, would not even dare to think about. Opposed to this stood days of pure darkness. Then something black

and burning would pass across his gaze, and a final defeat would follow. The people around him could see that dark look, as if it testified that the devil had arrived and now ruled his soul and actions, over which Philip no longer had any control. After that, his kindness would return as if nothing else had ever existed.

Naturally, this confused people. It would make them believe in the good Philip again. Yet what people and women loved or hated in him did not truly exist, because he was neither good nor bad, he neither loved nor was loved, for he, like the beast he dreamed of, had no distinct form.

In short, Philip was a man who, in his unhealthy state, lived for nothing and with no purpose. The beast he dreamed of, and which appeared before his eyes even after the nightmares, in a state of hazy wakefulness, meant only one thing to him: hopelessness. All questions and dilemmas about that hallucination faded under the hint of complete ruin. He sensed it, yet he did not admit the premonition even to himself. For a man who loved life, who with all his heart and soul desired freedom and comfort, this fear of the beast that came to him, as he suspected, from hell, meant the end. The only remedy for this hopelessness, for him, was the Sun. He did not believe in doctors and their medicines. He treated himself with sunlight. During sunny days he would go out into the yard and simply become cheerful. Then it seemed to him that he was like a larva in a cocoon, from which a butterfly would emerge when the time came. When rain followed a sunny day, he would feel a deep physical pain. It was the pain of realizing that he was simply ill. Severely, incurably ill, and nothing more.

Someone observing Philip might conclude that there was no clear boundary between Philip’s soul and the illness of that soul, nor could one guess what kind of man he would be if that illness were cured. Yet what lay beneath the illness promised strength and extraordinary talent. He was a very gifted artist, and above all intelligent, shrewd, and resourceful. Instead of the usual way people imagine the mentally ill, this man was the complete opposite of that image. Handsome, intelligent, educated, calm in his movements, with clear sentences and a measured, deep voice, he spent his time playing billiards and chess or painting. And in those things, as in everything else he undertook with sufficient persistence, he was exceptionally good. All in all, Philip was the embodiment of ancient beauty and a special gift, but the persistent nightmarish beast prevented his almost superhuman virtue, through fear, from revealing itself to the world in all its purity and brilliance.

Even as a boy, he showed exceptional talent. There was nothing he could not understand or do, from mathematics, to art and music, to the study of social sciences. In general, it was impossible to say in which direction he should be guided, and even if someone had cared enough for him to pursue formal education, they would not have known what advice to give him. Physics or painting? Music theory or philosophy?

Teacher Raden, the first of two people who would show interest in Philip's development, was both delighted and confused by the boy whose gift he had encountered. Aside from praise, which over time lost its meaning and turned into unnecessary phrases, the teacher did not know how to help or guide Philip's talent.

On the other hand, his father did not support him, and his mother had long been gone. No one knew where she was or what had happened to her, not even Philip. From her he inherited only a few cheap feminine trinkets, dresses, earrings, and other unnecessary little things, but also the beauty that later proved useful in compensating, at least in part, for the lack of attention and care. He remembered her vaguely, how she looked after him when he was six or seven years old, usually cold, distracted, or in tears. She was so absent-minded that he still bore a scar from a serious burn he had suffered because of her negligence. Yet it could not be said that she was to blame, for she too was ill. She suffered from hallucinations and had suicidal tendencies. She was a very sensitive and wounded soul, and she had married Philip's father while still knowing nothing about him, except his sweet talk and astonishing intelligence.

She felt his terrible sadism only later. The belittling of everything she did, humiliations, and insults followed in the third year of their marriage. Her tearful and painful reactions were then punished with beatings. She left her husband and child when Philip was nine years old, and by that time she had already attempted to cut her veins once and had once attacked her husband with a knife. In the periods between attempts at murder and suicide, she often turned to doctors, complaining of pains although she was physically healthy, and she spent long, lost hours in tears to which no one paid attention. Every call for help fell on deaf ears. Exhausted, one day she simply left, without announcement or trace. After that, the father transferred his restrained and refined sadism from his wife to his son.

When Philip was nine years old, when all this misfortune occurred, the nightmares began to torment him. Thus teacher Raden found himself before the confusing dilemma of what should be done and how this unhappy nine-year-old could be advised. Although it might have been expected that the boy would cling to the first person who showed him kindness as to a savior, it was not so. The boy was extremely quiet and cold. He hid the unfortunate circumstances as a personal shame. It seemed that he was burdened by a deep and unbearable guilt until he grew into a secondary school student. Then he found a way to silence that guilt.

The second man who took an interest in Philip, as teacher Raden had done, with a pure and good-natured soul rather than out of interest or amusement like the others, was the outstanding painter Chadi. This underestimated artist, a master of painting, had once served time in the central Caledonian penitentiary for anti-communist activity. He spent half his life in a futile struggle. He was a kind of eternal opposition, a constant counterforce, always on the side not of those who ruled, nor of the neutral, but of the afflicted people. He despised not only power and rule, but also the laziness of the so-called apolitical and undecided.

“Apolitical, what does that even mean?” Chadi used to say. “What do they mean when they say: I don’t want to be in politics, I don’t want to be part of it? They already are part of it, they only choose whether they will be active in it or lie down and watch the people around them suffer while slave-owners grow rich. Bah, that is sheer stupidity, and they are fools, I tell you! Just like agnostics, they would like immortality and God, but they don’t want responsibility. People are like that: they have food, they are comfortable, and why should they bother about some politics? They are all scoundrels, opportunists, and cowards, I tell you!”

Chadi achieved nothing. The democracy for which he had served time proved even worse. Therefore, he once again became the opposition. The opposing political current, even in this new, democratic Caledonia, would throw eggs at his house and spray it with insulting graffiti. To say that he was underestimated would be an understatement. Most academic positions had been taken over by people in power, and he, although respected abroad, meant almost nothing to his own people.

“Master of painting in the class of Professor Gonea, watercolorist and pointillist, received his degree in 1983 in Barcelona… well, that’s nice. Very nice,” people would say, and then continue, “There’s no bread in art these days. Where did you say Vasilyeva Street was? I go straight through the square and turn left?”

This painter, a favorite of Gonea himself, was invited abroad several times, yet he refused those invitations. He believed that the futile struggle, the struggle for Caledonia with a certain defeat, should not simply be left to anyone. It did not seem right to him, out of ambition or laziness, to abandon all those young people under the grip of false fathers of the nation and a shameless social morality twisted to the point of disgust.

“In this country everyone has equal rights, just as everyone has the same rate with a prostitute. That’s what this democracy is like,” he would say.

Chadi worked at the secondary school that Philip attended. Already in the first year, he found it astonishing that such an intelligent sixteen-year-old had such poor grades. He took him under his wing, taught him painting, gave him advice, and invited him to his home on Sundays in order to help him rise and begin to fight the battles for which, throughout your life, the entire world considers you a fool.

Thus Philip spent years learning painting and courage from Professor Chadi. It was interesting that Chadi, despite everything that had happened to him, was neither a drunkard nor a bitter misanthrope. He was a man of pure, calm spirit, full of will to live, without any desire for recognition or success, without the need to prove himself to the world or to his people. For him, the whole world was a harmonious whole, which he loved to mend whenever and wherever he could, but which, he believed, must never become an excuse for hatred. He fought, but did not despair. He reconciled himself, but did not surrender. In short, he lived out of love.

On one occasion, he revealed to Philip the secret of his calm nature. The great painter then said:

“You wonder why it is so, well, I will tell you what lies behind it: God. What is in me is God, and even if they told me I was foolish for believing in a spaghetti monster, I would agree to be foolish. I would stand proudly and say: yes, I am foolish. Besides, even if I myself wanted not to believe in that nonsense, I would not know how. How could I not believe my eyes blinded by the sunny sky while people tell me there is no Sun? How could I not believe the heart that sees?”

Philip listened carefully to all this, and it seemed to him that this spaghetti monster was something very wonderful. Then he too decided that it would be better to believe in God. However, he did not feel any difference between spaghetti and the Holy Trinity, and even if someone had explained that difference to him, it would have meant nothing. He understood every argument offered to him, nodded at every explanation, everything was very clear, yet it still felt distant to him. He understood, but he did not know how to feel.

Professor Chadi helped Philip, after he finished secondary school, to find a job with his friend, Mr. Makin, a businessman, wealthy and suspicious like all businessmen of that time in Caledonia. Makin kept Philip in the position of an administrative worker, regulating the color of envelopes and the certification of confirmations confirming confirmations. Every confirmation had to be certified, Makin explained. Also, every envelope had to be of the appropriate shade, because the wrong shade of yellow sent to an important person would indirectly express disrespect, and that important, that is, wealthy person, would be offended.

“That would be very bad for business,” Mr. Makin would warn.

He also often said that his workers must be smiling, because people, especially important people, did not like to see sadness. Important people, it seemed, considered a sad person something very unpleasant and shameful, and that a melancholy worker, if he did not already feel guilty for his sadness, should at least feel ashamed of it and hide it as best as he could.

Two years earlier, Professor Chadi had died. His friend Makin felt that he no longer had any obligation toward Philip, and he gradually arranged a way to dismiss him. More precisely, he tried to force him to resign on his own, by trampling his dignity and

humiliating him. As usual in Caledonia, this practice proved successful. Philip soon resigned, visibly shaken by the bitterness he felt at having to return to his father's house. Mr. Makin knew very well what Philip's situation was, but he no longer found amusement in acts of kindness. Besides, Chadi had died. The only thing that had obliged him to keep one more employee was no longer alive, therefore it was no longer valid.

However, Philip managed fairly quickly and found a job arranging envelopes elsewhere.

Shortly after the death of Professor Chadi, Philip was once again tormented by nightmares. Along with the nightmares, something clear, vivid, and terrifying appeared this time, something more dreadful than the nightmares themselves. They were hallucinations. At first, he heard only laughter that did not sound human, the giggling of beings that seemed to mock him, yet at the same time felt very close to him. These beings sometimes howled, shrieked, and screamed, and it all lasted only briefly.

At first, Philip was only slightly disturbed by these visions. He justified them as fatigue or alcohol. He read about alcoholic delirium and thought that the moment he stopped drinking, the voices would completely disappear. However, it was not so. Even when he spent days completely sober, the voices would appear just as often and just as clearly whenever he became restless. The dreams, alongside the hallucinations, became ghostly and unbearable. Soon he also began to sense strange smells.

Philip connected the nightmares in which he saw the shapeless apparition with fiery eyes to these smells and sounds he encountered while awake. Although he had already visited a doctor, where he received explanations about his illness, he did not believe that everything was so simple. It was not possible, in his mind, that such clear and vivid images from another world could exclude other worlds and universes. He could not justify his states and thoughts with a word as foolish and hopeless as psychosis. Something in Philip knew that this was not psychosis at all, and that it was, plainly and simply, the devil.

On this idyllic spring night, on the third of May 2009, there was nothing that could have disturbed Philip's inner depths or connected him with the old apparition. And yet,

he was convinced that the devil had not come into his dreams without reason. It had come as a warning, as an evil premonition that for ten years had been accurate and precise like a clock. It was as if he already knew that something terrible had happened. He was only waiting for the bad feeling to be confirmed. These nightmares were, for Philip, like memories of the future. His strange and precise intuition further strengthened his belief in the existence and arrival of the devil. A dull pain tormented his stomach, along with a strong uneasiness and gloom.

He poured himself a glass of icy water and drank it in one breath. After that, he lit a long cigarette. He pressed the filter to his lips and inhaled the smoke. He felt worse than the last time. This time the nightmares had been more vivid, stronger, and more ominous.

He did not want to burden Sophia with this. He would unburden himself with someone else, perhaps Tiana or Daniella, but first he needed to collect his thoughts. He stayed awake for several more hours. He waited for dawn with strong black coffee. He swallowed his third hot cup, burning his lips, barely waiting for the light to come. He alternated between cold and hot water in the shower, then rubbed his body vigorously with a rough towel. His naked skin had already turned red from the force of the rubbing, yet the stinging in his muscles did not stop. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face was pale as a corpse, and the circles under his eyes were almost black. Purple and dark bags beneath his eyes swallowed his tear-reddened eyes. He dressed quickly and threw on his old leather jacket. His back and limbs burned even more from the clothes and the weight of the leather. But he decided to endure the pain in his muscles and, in such poor condition, go to the only place he had not yet been.

In the Church

Through the glass mosaic on the church windows, the bright May sun broke inside. It was heavy and stuffy within. Particles of dust were clearly visible in the air, on the chairs, and across the nave. Something in the church made Philip want to cough. Perhaps the pollen of May flowers bothered him, perhaps the heat, or the uneasiness of uncertainty. He coughed, and a strong echo resounded through the empty church hall. A priest in black robes was just entering, bringing with him the smell of wax, smoke, and incense.

Philip took off his jacket, pulling down his short sleeves to cover his strong, swollen arms. He stood up. The priest greeted him as if he already knew him well. He looked at him as one would look at a good man. On the other hand, Philip was particularly distrustful of the priest. He imagined him breaking the great fast with anal sex, after which he would stuff his mouth with freshly roasted pork leg, grease running down his chin, as in old Shev novels. Nevertheless, he allowed him to lead him to a small room where they could talk peacefully. Philip sat down and, without asking, lit a cigarette, expecting to be reprimanded for breaking the rules. The priest said nothing.

“I read in a book,” Philip began, gathering courage, “that he possesses the soul until he tears it apart. Do you believe that?”

“I believe,” the priest replied.

“I went to a doctor and received medication. Lorazepan, Rispolept, and Eftil. But sometimes I feel that it is not an illness. Everything is like in the book… An unclean spirit comes to me. It comes to me in dreams as an evil premonition, as a memory of something that has yet to happen. Like an intuition of evil. And I see it. I hear it.”

The priest remained silent. Philip felt he had nowhere else to go and continued speaking.

“Maybe I am rambling. Maybe I am mad. But what if it isn’t madness, but illumination? What if he really is closer than ever before? What am I even saying, why did I even come! Logically, I must be mad.”

“Ah, logic!” the priest waved his hand and continued. “Logic is like mathematics, you can throw it to the cat if it is your only guide. Take two and two apples from this bowl, you will have four apples, mathematics says. But weigh them. Two apples will weigh one hundred grams, and the other two one hundred and twenty grams. What then do that four and that equal sign mean? Nothing more. And if you go into the precision of measurement, you will see that every hundred grams you measure is approximate… only the approximate is accurate! Ah! And here is logic: look there!” the old man said, pointing his finger along the sky. “Logic says: where the American flag is planted, there is the Moon. That’s your logic.”

“You are interesting,” Philip smiled. “I expected you to be somewhat more… you know… religiously rigid.”

“What do you mean, religiously rigid?”

“Well, you know. That you would judge, like all people of faith.”

“But no, no!” the priest replied. “That is not faith in God. That is the abuse of religion. Do not blame God for the fact that men of interest and hypocrisy have taken His name in vain. God speaks about that…”

“But God is silent!” Philip shouted, still restless from the nightmares. “God does not want to speak to me, do you know that? He has abandoned me. He does not need me.”

“He is not silent. He simply does not speak your language.”

“I don’t understand…”

“He speaks through the soul. The language of God is the language of conscience. All you have to do is pass a simple test in the knowledge of good and evil. Does that sound simple?”

“Let’s say it does.”

“But now, listen carefully!” The priest paused for a moment, then continued his story. “Imagine this scenario: you have a flock grazing and a wolf attacking. The wolf is hungry, driven by instinct, without mercy or fear, spilling the blood of its helpless victim, a kid that is guilty only of being a kid. Then, a brave shepherd enters the scene and attacks. The wolf defends itself, the fight is ugly. With his last strength, the shepherd manages to kill the wounded wolf. The flock, aside from being frightened, has no idea what is happening. There is no use blaming it. The flock is dull, it quickly forgets, and continues grazing. The victory of the brave shepherd is celebrated a little, and then everything goes on as before… And then, ah! Do you know what happens then?”

“I’m listening. What happens?”

“Christmas comes.”

“Christmas?” Philip was confused.

“Yes. Christmas comes, and the shepherd’s family gathers for a festive dinner. The shepherd slaughters a kid and serves it, after which the group of people feasts on the bloody meat of an innocent creature, guilty only of being what it is. That is, the lowest rung of the food chain in our story.”

“Ha, what a harsh comparison!” Philip burst into laughter. “The brave, good shepherd has the same impulses as the evil wolf, is that really so?”

“For the most part, yes. The question of good and evil is not simple at all, and it can be said that it is largely a matter of perspective.”

“And what is the shepherd supposed to do, graze on grass as well?” Philip asked mockingly.

“Well, the wolf and the shepherd are doing the same thing, aren’t they? That means either they are both bad, or they are both good, or they are both neither one nor the other. In the end, the wolf is not responsible for being a wolf, nor the kid for being a kid. Judgment is not an easy task. And condemnation even less so. But listen!” the priest raised his voice and lowered his head as if revealing a secret. “Such evil forces as you speak of, so strong and close, are rare, but bloody and monstrous. My answer to your question, my son, is this: yes, I believe in him. Whoever believes in God does not deny the devil either. I believe he possesses and comes. But I also believe in Lorazepan, Rispolept, and Eftil.”

“Do you mean that he will leave if I take the medication? That’s ridiculous!”

“Let medicine, man, and God help you. Some battles we cannot fight alone.”

“And if it doesn’t work? What if I do something… you know… if I do something terrible?”

“May God grant you honor, strength, and the language of conscience,” he said, and crossed him. Immediately afterward, the priest flinched, grabbed a thin book, and brushed several bugs off the table with it.

“I know these bugs are living creatures too, but there are so many of them that it’s simply unbearable. The harder they try to exterminate them, the more there are. Even the church walls are full of them. I was at the Tax Administration and the Bank a few days ago on some business, there were the most of them there. One can hardly breathe because of them.”

Philip was not interested in the bugs at all. He was satisfied with the conversation with the priest, although he had not confessed his troubles as he had planned. The pleasant May sun and the gentle, mild wind also cheered him. The day was so pleasant that he almost forgot his dark premonition. He still had not called Sophia. Justifying himself by saying he did not want to burden her, he called Dana and told her he would come around ten in the evening.

He slept in the afternoon, calmed by the conversation with the priest, the medication he had taken, and an increased dose of nicotine. As soon as darkness fell at nine o’clock, he took a hot shower and went straight into Dana’s arms, forgetting to call his beloved Sophia.

“How are you, Phi?” Dana asked, spreading her lips into a joyful and gentle smile.

“Tired. I have insomnia.”

“Are you having nightmares again?”

“Horrible ones. I always dream the same terrifying dreams about a black apparition. It’s disgusting and unbearable.” He himself did not know why he was telling her this.

“Ah, I understand. You had a difficult life,” Dana said with deep compassion. Although Philip could be cold and somewhat distant, her passion for him did not fade. He came to her rarely, but always awakened the same impulses. Long after a night with him, she would imagine leaving everything behind and going with the blue-eyed handsome

man into a romantic unknown. A cliché, just like those women's series with over two hundred episodes. It was as if he read that typical feminine soul within her.

He kissed her lightly, playfully. He slipped his hand between her thighs and watched her body twist. She moaned. Suddenly, he thought he heard giggling. He flinched. His heart began to pound strongly, but he decided to ignore it and continued kissing the soft, slender body of the woman melting beneath him. Dana bent down, sliding her tongue across his hairy groin. The giggling grew louder until Philip began to recognize voices. He could almost distinguish male and female tones in the voices shouting on the other side of his ear. Frightened, he pushed Dana away and jumped back.

"I… I can't… sorry… really."

As he said this, he rushed out of the apartment, leaving behind the confused woman who, wiping sweat and smoothing her hair, watched him in astonishment.

The night was calm, and the wind gentle and warm. Still, Philip was sweating from haste and panic. He walked quickly and often turned around. He smoked nervously. Something hurt in his stomach, in his throat, in his hands, everywhere. His legs and arms tingled from chilled blood, while from fear he could no longer perceive anything around him except vague anxiety and paranoia. He wanted to dig his nails into his skin, into the marrow and the bones, to tear apart every piece of fresh, pink flesh on himself. His face was red and burned as if scorched. He inhaled a strong drag of smoke, which calmed him for a moment.

Just when he thought the unrest had passed and that his blood was warming again, he heard a neigh.

No, that could not be it. It was only some animal in the distance, a draft horse or some dog. A wave of hot sweat ran down his spine, immediately cooling and freezing his limbs with fear. The neighing he heard was now very close. Something was breathing behind his neck. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, convincing himself that

everything was fine and that there was no one behind him. However, the neighing was heard again.

Philip suddenly opened his eyes. The cigarette slipped from his hands because of the violent trembling. In front of him, in a mass of undefined darkness, were those eyes. It was him. This time, he was alive and real.

Thinking that his beast would seize him, that it would grab him by the throat and tear his soul apart, Philip ran down the street with a scream. It was over. The gates of the other world were open. Abandon all hope.

Unable to see anything from fear, he tripped over a concrete step and fell full length to the ground. Thinking that it was over, that he had been defeated, thinking only of the devil and fear, he lay paralyzed for several moments until he lost consciousness.

He was awakened by icy water with which a passerby had splashed his face. “He’s here… he came… the devil came for me,” Philip said, gripping the passerby roughly with his hands. Realizing what he was dealing with, the man slipped from Philip’s grasp and ran away without a word. Philip, with wide pupils and completely alone, dragged himself to a lit part of the street and sat down on the asphalt. No one was there. Everything was ordinary and calm. He lit a cigarette and pushed it between his bluish lips. He was terribly thirsty.

He rose from the sidewalk and slowly dragged himself to his apartment. He fell asleep with the light on, thinking about how the very next day he would buy an even stronger, brighter bulb. There must always be light. The devil does not come where there is light.

In the Hospital

After a few hours, the alarm clock woke him. He took Lorazepan, Rispolept, and Eftil only because the priest had told him to. He did not remember his dreams, but he had slept very poorly and restlessly. He showered alternately with warm and cold water, drinking it as he washed because he was still tormented by an unbearable and persistent thirst. He rubbed himself with a sponge over his hairy stomach and groin. He looked at his large member and thought of Sophia. The heavy penis in his hands made him feel confident, proud, filled him with himself, and was probably the only reason for the self-love he still had, apart from his already nearly useless beauty. He groaned and washed the white fluid from his feet, but he did not stop thinking about Sophia.

In a way, he loved her. And she, in her life crisis, probably loved only his large member. She was young. She did not even know what was happening to her. She probably did not know that she could find pleasure elsewhere, with other men who were richer, better, healthier. Otherwise she would have left him. She probably would leave him anyway. Just like all the others. That was why she was not answering the phone. Who knew with whom she was now, and whom she had found to moan and scream on? Maybe that nouveau riche. Maybe she was now playing with him in that disgusting jeep of his that consumed fuel like a Russian battle tank.

Philip was seized by gloom and jealousy. An old pain awakened senseless rage. That rage had to be vented on someone, urgently, it had to be.

After showering, he drained a glass of cold water. Angry, swollen, and in the mood to torment, he called Sophia. In a calm, but serious and deep voice, he asked her where she was. Then, restraining his anger, he added in a commanding tone, “Come.”

On the other side of the line there were sighs and silence. An elderly voice whispered that Sophia was dead. A heart attack at work.

Philip did not feel like crying. What could be done now? The fear, of which he was hardly even aware, intensified his anger and that old, malicious impulse because of which

they had always called him a troublesome boy, Demian. The devil had come for Sophia, of that he was now convinced. The dreams had foretold this death. Memory of the future functioned in Philip flawlessly, as always. It seemed to him that he remembered the future better than the past, and that intuition in him was stronger than memory. Only now, somehow, he was too broken, too without hope, too ill to suffer. He did not feel like crying. He felt the need to drink, to unburden himself, to go out. He wanted sex, he wanted to vent his anger, to light a cigarette, to catch a little more sleep.

Today he had to go to the doctor. He washed his face with cold water before leaving. He thought alternately about Sophia's death and about the beast with fiery eyes. He did not understand why he did not feel like crying. He had cried when he read that book about possession, he had cried when he learned his diagnosis, and now he was not crying over the woman he loved. Perhaps because one part of him hated Sophia after all, and perhaps one part of him had even wished her dead.

For his visit to the doctor, he prepared a pleasant and normal facial expression. He could not bear to be kept in that institution. He put on a blue sweater and shaved his beard with precision. He combed his hair neatly and brushed his teeth thoroughly, yellowed from tobacco. It irritated him that his teeth were so yellow. He took the bus to the hospital, politely paying for the ticket. He passed the porter's desk so calmly and deliberately that no one would have thought that such a gallant and charming young man was heading to the psychiatric ward.

"Good afternoon, Philip, how are you today?" asked Doctor Paros with a kind smile.

Philip told her about Sophia's death and about his strong intuition, flawless to the point of clairvoyance, which he liked to call "memory of the future." Although he maintained a calm and composed expression, Philip was drenched in sweat from fear and restless foreboding, because he was not sure that, after this story about the devil, they would allow him to go home.

"What exactly was it that you saw?" Doctor Paros asked.

“He has no form, but I know it is him. You can hear him growling, neighing, like a horse, like a beast. He is indistinct, only his eyes of fire are clearly visible. It is the devil. The same one I have been dreaming about before, I am sure.”

“Do you hear anything else besides that? Do you dream anything else?”

“I hear giggling, I hear screams, male and female. I smell sulfur, ammonia, and acid. I smell salt and dark soil. It is the presence of hell. It is all a sign of the apocalypse. And the dreams… the dreams are varied, but they are never beautiful. Except for wet dreams, I do not dream beautiful things at all,” he said, lifting his tormented gaze toward a spot on the wall eaten away by bugs.

For a while, a heavy silence settled. Philip fell into thought, then suddenly added:

“Sophia… she was foolish to let them kill her. Worse men than that have not killed me. She was so weak and strong at the same time. She was like a fragile glass bottle filled with poisonous liquor. They did not see that, they could not see it. If they had any sense, they would know what to do with someone like Sophia. A fragile, passionate, intelligent woman is unnecessary in Caledonia? If such a woman is not needed in Caledonia, then Caledonia is a land of ruin! If only they were not so stupid, so narrow-minded and repulsive, who knows what I might have become! Maybe none of this would have happened, maybe I would now be receiving some award, I would be an academic painter, I would be a psychologist, a sociologist, a playwright, and then the devil would never have chosen me.”

“Which they, Philip?”

“They. All of them. Nobody cares.”

“You think no one loves you?” the doctor asked, gently touching her forehead.

“Well, no one does!” he laughed. “Don’t tell me that anyone cares, that’s a collective lie created for social peace. No one loves anyone. I realized that long ago. Believe me, since then I’ve known very well who I am. Maybe since birth, maybe I’ve always known, but all this time it seems to me that I’m fighting in vain, and that what I am and what I will remain has already been determined by something…”

Doctor Milena Paros simply looked at him silently, expecting him to continue with more gloomy thoughts which, it seemed to her, he guarded like a fortress. Philip was sweating, and the reverse side of anger appeared on his cold face.

“I know what you’re thinking now,” he told her. “You think I’m a lost case, is that it? You think I’m imagining things, but what if what I see is really the devil? What if he has chosen me to serve him, without the right to hope, solidarity, or God? What am I even telling you! You’re a skeptic, you’re a vain mouse that cannot exist without its white coat.”

“If it really is the devil, then none of us have any salvation. If it isn’t the devil, we will increase the therapy. After a year of treatment, you will know. If it disappears, then it is a hallucination. If it remains…” Milena Paros fell silent, not finishing the thought.

“What if it remains?” he asked, shuddering with fear.

“Just take your medication regularly,” she replied, filling out the prescription illegibly and typing some reports, occasionally glancing at the clock while mentally calculating how many minutes and hours remained until the end of her working day.

Philip noticed this and was overcome with bitterness, followed by anger. They were all the same, he thought. All the same, all of them. She was only waiting for her working hours to end so she could go home. Women’s business, selfish and calculating women’s business. A tree cannot escape the forest.

It seemed that an intelligent man like Philip should have respected medicine and doctors more. It could not be said that he did not respect them; he even envied them, because he himself wanted to be as important as they were, but something about their character angered him to the point of rage. He considered them selfish, believed them to be superficial, egocentric, and in fact very ordinary. He thought them petty and repulsive in their self-importance. In short, petty bourgeois. Perhaps this feeling of discomfort toward doctors was also caused by fear, the fear that he depended on them, that at any moment they could confine him, under the legal pretext of helping him. That discomfort turned into anger so difficult to control that Philip defended himself with contempt. Yet this feeling in him only resembled contempt. In fact, it was a kind of almost psychopathic hatred and its symmetry - fear.

"Maybe I'm imagining it, maybe I really am imagining it… maybe she wants to help," he struggled with his thoughts while a powerful conflict grew within him between the desire to trust this woman and a painful, deep hatred. The problem of that conflict was finding less and less ground in the fact that she was a doctor. She was a woman. She was of his mother's generation. She was dark-haired and pale-faced, with bloodshot eyes swollen from tears, full bluish lips, slender and truly beautiful. She reminded him too much of her.

Philip grabbed the reports, stood up, and rushed out of the office. He did not want his old pain to defeat him and have him confined because of an unnecessary outburst of anger. Now, more than anything, he needed Sophia. To sleep with her. To torment and irritate her. To complain to her. To sympathize. To release himself into her white skin and lips, to release himself at least in words, because he could no longer bear this painful and forced self-control for even a moment.

He shifted nervously from foot to foot while waiting for the medical worker to stamp his prescriptions. He thought it was good that healthcare was still free and that greedy nouveaux riches had not yet crept into every pore of society to fatten their flabby backsides.

"Damn bugs," the orderly muttered as he pressed a red bug with a thick, round stamp, loudly cracking its shell. "They're everywhere, breeding, getting fat, devouring everything in front of them. Soon they'll start eating us too, and when there's nothing left

of us, they'll eat each other. They're disgusting, lazy parasites without purpose or measure."

Philip truly was not interested in the bugs at all. He was already reaching for the lighter in his pocket and slowly pulling out a cigarette, lighting it before he had even crossed the threshold of the psychiatric ward. Just as he brought the filter to his lips, dried from thirst, the orderly stopped him with a warning:

"You forgot to pay fifty euros in co-payment."

"Co… what?" Philip asked.

"You have to pay a co-payment. That's the law. What can you do? Even in America there's no free healthcare. They're slowly introducing real capitalism here. Anyway, you have to pay the treatment fee."

Philip felt around in his pocket and pulled out a few crumpled banknotes. His face remained uniform and cold. The orderly noticed that Philip seemed distant and immediately fell silent. He stamped the papers sharply, handed over the prescriptions, and repeated:

"Fifty euros!"

At “The Black”

“I’m sorry about Sophia. I went crazy for the first three days when I heard. I can imagine how it was for you,” Mihael said to his friend Philip while they drank beer in the nearby tavern “The Black.”

“I didn’t even cry. I couldn’t. I didn’t feel the need. I don’t know…” Philip was completely honest. “Besides, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Everyone has their own ways of expressing grief. If it helps you to drink it away… Waiter! Another one!”

Philip put out one cigarette and immediately lit another while the owner, Black, set two more sweet beers on the table.

“So, what’s happening with you?” Philip asked.

“I enrolled in psychology, finally. I read that book you recommended.”

“Which one? Demons?”

“Yes… it’s interesting. As if it says: God is meaning, and no one, no one may or can lose their God without finding the devil. In any case, I like how he used the soul of man to portray the soul of a nation.”

“Interesting, but that’s not the main point…” Philip replied.

“The system is the main point, certainly. At every step you can clearly see how the state collapses, evil forces take it away and, like germs of plague, devour the soul of the people. Totalitarianism in the dress of democracy. Even a woman’s love becomes impure. Caledonia, like other Caledonias similar to it, has plunged into the black hole of cursed rule toward self-destruction. It is nothing but bad governance. Just as the devil watches over the main character, so a black cloud of rain made of hot acids hovers over fertile land.”

“You don’t understand, that’s not the point… it’s about the devil,” Philip lowered his head darkly, and his otherwise masculine voice became deeper and stronger as he spoke. “You don’t know where evil comes from. You don’t know who he is. He is among us, unseen, hidden, and clever. He is in man, in the pure soul of man, he is a master without mercy, yet you depend on his mercy. He will slip among us, he will defeat even the smartest among us using our own intelligence. The mind is the tool he knows how to use. You are not even aware, you do not even suspect… Do you have any idea what he manipulates?”

“Pride?” Mihael guessed through dark, sweet gulps.

“Come on, pride only in Hollywood films, don’t be ridiculous… Desire, my friend. The devil manipulates desire. He knows what you want, and he will give it to you, even if your desire is pure, the noblest mercy. Desire! Remember: desire is the most dangerous thing,” Philip concluded, sighed deeply, and continued in a kind of fervor. “And that book, that book is a treasure. When you choose books, remember that what matters most is what they tell you. Bypass form, entertainment, and beauty. Beauty will not save the world, that is nonsense. That book gives you the devil, senseless evil, raw evil that possesses an innocent human soul without merit and without guilt. But it also gives you power, like the holy book… Do you even know, do you know what strength is required for a wolf not to slaughter a lamb?! Much greater than the strength a lamb needs to graze peacefully, my friend. You don’t know what an unclean spirit is!”

Philip spoke without noticing that his sentences and thoughts were no longer connected, that he was losing his thread with reality and logic.

“I don’t understand… you’re confused.”

“I thought it was…” Philip began, then suddenly stopped.

“Yes? Say it,” Mihael asked curiously. “Go on.”

“I forgot what I wanted to say.”

“That’s impossible! You can’t forget a thought you just started.”

“I did forget.”

Mihael was very surprised. Philip seemed too scattered and chaotic, but he attributed it to the still fresh grief over Sophia’s death. He remained silent, letting his friend gather his turbulent thoughts.

“Look,” Philip suddenly jumped and continued speaking, “To understand life, to understand the main character of that book, to understand this unfortunate Caledonia, it is not enough to know, to read, to see. You must feel. An insult is not enough, a sideways glance or fear is not enough. Mental pain under the pressure of the system is not enough, nor unease under the small teeth of petty human malice. No, we need a ruler who mercilessly impales living bodies or nails them to a cross under the cold wind of hatred, who does not hear the dreadful cry of pain that destroys every longing, ideal, and will, leaving only pain, only the final and sole triumph of evil. We need suffering that drives reason away, that makes the earth tremble, that darkens the Sun itself! If that is the only thing that can defeat that irritating but fatal stupidity, if it will force people into rebellion, into resistance, then let it be! Let the slaves of illness, the slaves of power, and the slaves of the devil, especially the slaves of the devil, bear children only for them to be tortured by endless pain. If that is the only way for solidarity to be born, then let everyone suffer. And truly, why should some be spared and others tormented? Only evil knows how to establish justice properly. Only before evil are we all equal, unfree and afraid. Only before evil do we all have the same desire, and that is final death. And if that desire does

not soon appear, then our people have already become a living corpse. Then we are already dead. Then we have already lost God and there is no help for us anymore. Then it is only a matter of time before we, like worms, begin to devour one another miserably, without a trace of conscience and with the firm conviction that we have no choice."

Foam gathered at the corner of Philip's saliva-wet lips as he spoke.

"Good, unfortunate man, tell me: what is happening to you?" Mihael asked, already visibly confused by Philip's behavior. Something strange and serious was happening to Philip, and this particularly intrigued Mihael.

"I… I don't know," Philip replied. "Something is taking hold of me…"

He scraped his forehead with his fist and hid his gaze.

"We should talk about this soon. Maybe Sophia's death is troubling you?"

"What troubles me is a premonition," Philip finally said, and continued. "Before something bad would happen in my life, nightmares would begin about a shapeless beast chasing me. In my mind there is an infallible omen of evil. I foresee future events through dreams. But only unfortunate events."

"That's possible. Jung spoke about that when he discussed synchronicity. Besides, nothing terrible. Many creative, intuitive people have such ominous nightmares, night visions full of signs, symbols, and images. Why does it trouble you so much? Do you think you foresaw her death? Or that the dream is only an expression of exaggerated guilt?"

"I don't know. I'm in chaos. This has been happening for more than ten years."

“What if you see it as a talent? Or as a power - turn the nightmare to your advantage, use it as a warning, be prepared.”

“I can’t see it that way. It’s memory of the future. It’s the devil’s work.”

“How do you know it’s the devil? How do you know it isn’t something else?”

“Because it uses fear.”

“What are you afraid of? Dreams? A monster under the bed? Yourself?” Mihael asked.

“You don’t understand…” Philip muttered, lowering his head. It was as if he wanted to say that he had experienced such a vivid and real hallucination that it was no longer possible not to believe in the devil, but he fell silent, afraid that Mihael’s attitude toward him might change completely.

“Hey, I’m a psychologist. I must understand,” Mihael encouraged him.

“Ha-ha. What kind of psychologist are you, please? You’ve only just enrolled in your first year,” Philip laughed, suddenly changing his mood.

“And passed two exams. And met a new friend.”

“Is she a psychologist?”

“A sociologist.”

“Whatever. At least is she pretty?”

“She’s just coming, judge for yourself,” Mihael replied proudly, as the lady in the purple dress approached the table. The curls of her long hair were tinted with a honey color, and the natural paleness of her face emphasized her deep black eyes. A knitted purple dress fell along her rounded body and firm thighs, down to her knees, tight across the chest and waist, ready to reveal all the warmth of her young body. Mihael became absorbed in watching her warm figure and damp hair, which spread a sweet, fruity scent through the haze of tobacco smoke. She seemed strong and confident to him, while Philip observed her quite differently. She extended her hand and, in a hoarse voice, said quietly:

“Jana.”

Only that calm, feminine voice took Philip’s breath away. Only then did he notice the line of her body suggested by the tight purple dress and the fragrant hair that lured him, making him forget Sophia’s death entirely. He looked at Jana’s body, thinking that this was exactly what he needed now. Mihael noticed this and trembled with unpleasant jealousy.

Beauty did its work. Half an hour later, Jana was already lying on the bed in Philip’s room. Her skin was soft and smooth, and her face naturally youthful. She did not resemble other girls. She did not care about fashion, she had thick black eyebrows and a dense patch of hair between her legs. But she had a smile that made something inside Philip melt with pure passion. Without love, without jealousy, he held only a beautiful, submissive woman, like courtesans from the sixteenth century, with bright lipstick, individuality, and a wild nature. She welcomed him as if she had always loved him, skillfully and intoxicatingly, like a practiced lover. Philip forgot that Sophia had ever existed. Now he once again had someone to overwhelm with his striking beauty and his ambivalent curse.

“Where is the girl you told me about?” Jana asked while wiping sweat and lighting a cigarette that made her cough.

“She’s dead,” he said coldly.

“Well… aren’t you sorry?” she asked again, surprised, with a cold warning unease as she looked at his expressionless face.

“I am. I’m just exhausted.”

“From what?”

“From evil. I’ve gotten used to it,” he said as he rose from the bed and walked to the window, staring into the distance as if he were still suffering. His expression remained the same, indifferent and comfortably cold. Closed inside an autistic shell, somewhere between the world of the dead and the world of the living, between hell and reality, he knew there was only one way to keep sweet Jana in his bedroom - not to tell her a single word about the hallucinations that tormented him.

“Can I stay tonight?” she asked, watching his back, assuming he was crying, because that was what any ordinary person would do when confronted with death. She felt sorry for him. She embraced him and fell asleep, forgetting the unease caused by the darkness of madness written in the expression of his face.

The Morning After

Around six in the morning, Jana was awakened by roosters. She lifted her head and found Philip in the same position by the window. He stood with his back turned, almost without blinking, staring at the Sun. She got up shyly, hiding her smeared makeup. She pulled her wrinkled dress over herself. Philip's poor room smelled of stale air and cheap tobacco. Jana always experienced the morning after as the collapse of beauty, like when the ringing of a phone wakes her from a sweet dream. And now she would gather herself like mud shaken from a shoe, thinking about her future as a small-time slut whom no one would want, who would marry only to get that obligation over with, thinking how night after night she would dream of beauty she could not have. Ivan's beauty. Marco's beauty. And now - Philip's beauty.

Yet just as she reached for the handle with downcast lips, Philip stirred. He noticed she was there. He was calm from the sunlight and good sleep. He looked at her, not understanding why she was sad, and said:

"Don't go."

Her eyes sparkled.

"I have to go to the market, I have to go home, I have to…" she said, confused.

"Come tonight."

"I will," she smiled and left. That was exactly what she needed. Balanced sentences, a masculine voice, the clear desire of a man who knows what he wants and knows he deserves it. A man. He was not just a man, he was a Man. He was everything that word implied, not just a timid aunt with a randomly attached penis like the others. That was all she thought about as she pushed through the crowd toward the market stalls.

The colorful variety of people brought the old market to life. Tin stalls were covered with rows of fresh tomatoes and dark red cherries. Voices blended into the usual Saturday crowd, competing and overlapping without order:

"Bags, bags! Come on, bags and totes!"

"It's fresh, the hail only bruised it a little… here, see…"

"Five euros is too much… how too much? One loaf of bread costs that much!"

"It was better when he ruled, you know! I used to sell foreign currency, and now look: I can't even buy sneakers for my kids…"

"No, ma'am, I don't come on Mondays, do you know how much the stall costs?"

"Here, a skirt, just right for you, like new, and two euros… where are you going, wait… want it for one euro?"

Jana turned toward the skirt seller, smiled, and shook her head. She only heard the man shouting after her, "Here, fifty cents, that's not much… and it's like new…" as she slipped through the crowd. She tightened her thin bag with a few green apples, careful not to spill the fruit. She hurried because of the clouds. It would rain soon, she should hurry. She would be late for work. If she was late now, she would receive another disciplinary warning. A few oranges and apples were not worth that… but tonight… tonight, if she did not get fired, she would shine in full femininity. She would wear the red dress and put on her citrus-and-strawberry perfume and be with Philip.

As Jana drifted in her thoughts, her path was cut by a young dark-skinned woman who addressed her in a calm voice:

"Let me tell your fortune, let me remove the spell, you carry some trouble…"

"Another fraud," Jana thought, rolling her eyes. "Who doesn't have trouble today?"

The Roma woman murmured quietly and followed her while Jana dismissed her, quickening her pace. Before her walk turned into a run, she took a moment to observe the dark-skinned woman. She was rather pretty and in her late thirties. Poverty seemed to have consumed all the youth and pleasantness of her face. The dark shadows beneath her eyes revealed that she had long lived in that meager way, outside the illusion of freedom and without the comfort of certainty. It seemed that this woman was not responsible for her poverty; it was not her choice, nor her excuse, but only the leftover ash of some past flame that had once burned brightly. In old canvas slippers and a long skirt, she skillfully avoided puddles and slipped beyond the role of a victim. She was trying to survive by relying on the familiar story of fortune-telling. Whether she believed in it or deceived others did not matter. She had no choice.

"Your soul is restless, money slips away from you, and you have troubles in love, I can see it in your eyes, let me help…," the young Roma woman repeated, leaning close to Jana's face.

Jana suddenly stopped and felt pity. Thinking of dreadful poverty as a plague of the new age, pushed by fear of that very poverty as if it were contagious, she handed the woman some money without even listening to her. The woman smiled in gratitude and took her hand in a gesture of solidarity. But at that very moment, she stopped as if burned and jerked her hand away. Her young dark face tightened with fear. She nearly gasped, her eyes widening with alarm. Holding her frightened gaze fixed on Jana as she walked away, the Roma woman whispered in horror:

"Bengalo manush!" [possessed by the devil]

Cerberus

Five months had passed since then, and autumn had already grown cold. Philip was increasingly tormented by restlessness and was less and less able to comfort or distract himself with Jana. She had long noticed that he did not sleep at night and that heavy dark circles had formed under his eyes. His cheeks were swollen, and his lips had sunk into a jaw that hung open uncontrollably on his half-dead expression. Yet he was still handsome.

It was Saturday when Philip finally could not endure any longer. At half past four in the afternoon, while sitting over the daily newspaper, his head simply drooped. He fell asleep sitting, and his body slowly slid onto the dusty, hard couch. The air was thick and he could barely breathe, but he slept deeply, entering, with the autumn dusk, precisely that stage of sleep he feared most. He dreamed of Sophia, a cat, a cart full of logs, the Trojan horse, blood, Snow White and the dwarfs, a pile of scattered images he could not connect in any way, which served his subconscious as a frantic escape. Then something indistinct began to call him.

At that moment, Philip awoke from the unpleasant dream, drenched in cold sweat. The first thing he felt was relief that the nightmares had spared him today. Yet, without explanation, his hands twitched restlessly. He drank a glass of cold water, then rushed into a bracing shower, washing away the bodily unrest whose cause he did not know this time. Perhaps this unrest was a warning, the breath of misfortune, his famous memory of the future?

The sound of the gate startled him before he could fully gather his thoughts, and he noticed that nine o'clock had passed and that Jana would arrive soon. He ran through the yard, filled with sweet nervousness, and hurried to unlock the courtyard gate.

When he greeted Jana at the entrance to the yard, he had already forgotten the tremor in his hands. The first thing he noticed was that she had dressed up especially for him. She wore that particular red dress, light and wide from the waist down, which made her look sweetly girlish. Thin red lines of lace peeked from beneath the dress, hinting at a different image that boldly undermined her naïve, girlish appearance. The sandals on her feet had only a slight heel and revealed a harmonious foot with delicately polished nails.

The scent and fullness of her body, her large, shining teeth, and childish smile awakened in Philip a strong desire for a woman in all her maturity, but also for a young girl with whom he could play a game in which there were no mistakes and no disappointments.

He simply pushed her, surprised, into his apartment, pressed her body roughly against the door, and tore the dress without asking. A masculine, irrational passion awakened in him. He moved away for a moment, only to look at the ideal figure of the girl, then approached her again roughly and began a wild game. Sometimes he laughed to soften the harshness of the moment, only to be carried away again by his impulsiveness. With her, he could do anything. She was obedient and passive, sometimes pulling away from his body in playful provocation, only for him to draw her back into his game with silently approved force, until he completely conquered her feigned resistance. He then became gentler, attentive, listening to her sighs and the intentions of her body, only to suddenly and mercilessly satisfy himself, filling her with a pleasant pain. Her body tensed, her lips fell silent, until the silence was broken by a cry. He struggled to hold back, gripping her hand tightly, but as soon as he felt her sink into calm and relax her tense fingers, he let out his voice and spilled his seed across her face, neck, and lips.

He lit a cigarette and stood up, approaching the window as he always did. He stood motionless and, with curious interest, looked at the sky, his back turned, frighteningly calm.

“Do you believe in the devil?” he suddenly asked.

“You mean, do I believe in God?”

“Yes, that… in both,” he muttered casually, while feeling the tremor return to his hands.

“I believe,” Jana replied. “But I don’t believe in religion. Shouldn’t Christianity, above all, be the teaching of Christ himself? At least that’s how I understood it, the Old Testament as a code of laws, largely a word of its time, and the New Testament as a universal word, as an eternal principle of life. Shouldn’t that be internal rather than

external, spiritual rather than material, freedom rather than submission? Let laws be guided by order, equality, and justice, but faith should be guided only by love. Love, not threats and demands. Because of demands we have ended up where we are, because we think that by fulfilling and setting rules based on faith we will elevate the human spirit, that by rules we can force someone to fulfill their duty. Having children, for example, before other life issues are resolved, only multiplies the problem. Only when we put our social order in place do we have the right to speak about reproduction. New generations in today's time make no sense, because when two devils multiply, they produce devils. Reproduction does not benefit society if hypocrisy and materialism rule it. The same goes for celibacy and fasting. What is the point of fasting if a person only waits for it to end so they can overeat? A scholar once said, I think, that 'if fasting makes you proud, it is better to eat meat.' Do you understand what I mean? People must be given a certain freedom in order to truly discover faith. Only when a person chooses on their own to take responsibility can we speak of a truly spiritual person. Everything else is casting pearls before swine."

"Still, you think in a Christ-like way, like a revolutionary and a socialist," Philip laughed. "Admit it, little one, you're red."

"No, no, I'm not," Jana continued, still serious and absorbed. "Certain steps of distortion can be felt within socialist ideology itself, like the assumption of equality that denies not only the sick, but even some ordinary, healthy differences to such an extent that it will readily suppress any individualism, even the useful kind if it is critical and harmful to the system. It's similar with capitalism; in its very foundation you can already see the distortion. All of that differs from the teaching of Christ, which cannot be abused. Unfortunately, since it is difficult for many to understand, the idea of 'external' religion appears, one that refers to rituals and that can indeed be twisted. So socialism, although it believes it is doing something noble by abolishing religion, makes a fatal mistake and abolishes the flawless, perfect, and salvational teaching of Christ under the assumption that it is unnecessary. And it is necessary, terribly necessary because—not all misfortunes come from material inequality… Philip, you're trembling. Are you alright?" Jana asked.

"My throat feels tight," he lied.

“And your head?” she looked at him intently, though he still kept his back turned. He felt that gaze and, both frightened and angry, shouted, “Excuse me?!”

“You’re not well, Philip.” Jana was determined to say everything she thought to the end. He swallowed with difficulty, convinced that she had realized something strange was happening to him and that he had lost her. And what was worse, his dark premonition and tremor, his strange memory of the future, were once again right.

“You’re not well,” Jana repeated stubbornly. “You’re on the edge of hell. Mental disintegration. As if you had several heads, each with its own will and consciousness. Like Cerberus. Do you know who Cerberus is?”

“A rock band?” he tried to joke, hoping to distract her from her persistent probing of his mind and soul.

“Cerberus - the three-headed dog - is a mythological figure of the ancient Greeks, the guardian of the entrance to Hades, the underworld. He makes sure that dead souls do not escape from the underworld. Dante Alighieri replaces this guardian of hell with the inscription ‘abandon all hope,’ and places the three-headed dog in the third circle of hell, where he tears apart wretches who sinned greatly on Earth. Cerberus, as a symbol, represents disintegration, a divided soul, divided thoughts and feelings, and as such he is mental illness. Just as God, harmony, peace of mind, and spiritual completeness are marked by the Holy Trinity, so unrest and chaos are actually fragmentation and division. Cerberus is the Greek symbol of splitting into conflicting segments of chaos. Cerberus is a premonition of mental hell. Psychosis,” she explained, almost imaginatively.

“The Greeks were far more devoted to hell than to heaven,” he said, trying to change the subject.

“Everyone and everything has three heads within. Psychologists divide them into the conscious, the subconscious, and the unconscious. Sigmund Freud divided them into the id, ego, and superego. Faith divides them into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The devil has Cerberus. Then there are the three sides of one being: the spiritual, the

mental, and the physical. You know, other people also have conflicts; their reason is not always aligned with their feelings either. Anger overtakes reason in others as well, and then they split into two states, two cosmoses, or rather into two, three, or four heads, where one loses dominance and another loses control. But you… with you it seems stronger, more vivid, and beyond all logic."

Philip was already overcome with nervousness and malice. He felt the urge to spite her, so he casually grabbed the sugar from the table and poured it into Jana's glass of lemonade, which she always preferred sour.

"What are you doing? You're like a child!" she exclaimed, frowning.

And although Philip would normally have felt such words as criticism, although they would usually act as a trigger, darkening his mind and gaze to the point of violence, this time it was not so. Something inside him seemed to crack. He felt the need to confess, to cry, even to embrace someone. Jana noticed this and quickly began speaking about something entirely different, something neither about psychosis nor lemonade, something that faded and was forgotten the very moment she spoke it.

Philip listened to her for a while, and then began to tell his own vision of the story of Cerberus.

"You know, you're right… I feel unrest and anger… as if there were three of us inside me at once. As if, out of those three, only I am rational and capable of control, while the rest are more like animals. Monsters, really. Moreover, I am calm and indifferent, I know that two and two make four, I speak evenly and watch what I say, I calculate and kiss deliberately. The other one inside me - he is madness. He is furious and ready for any crime you can imagine, and he commits them without control, though never without reason. I have always felt so sorry, my heart breaks, yet I understand him. He is Me, and I cannot fail to understand him, I cannot condemn him. Even if I could, I would not. I have seen the world, and I can tell you, surely and responsibly, that He only speaks aloud what everyone else suppresses. He is a man just as we are all men, and he is so human that he does not commit only horror and evil, but also such beautiful and noble

things - everything that has ever fallen into my hands, everything, he has done. And if I renounced his evil, I would have to renounce his sublime good as well.

He does not know how to calculate, to count what is given and returned, he knows nothing of money, vanity, or forecasts. He knows only feelings. When he appears, I seem to sink into some deep, sleeping shadow of my soul, and he takes over my role. Of course, from that depth I see everything and am aware of everything, but I observe it from a distance, like someone who can do nothing. And I never even wanted to do anything. Believe me, He, although he has no awareness and perhaps is not even human, knows very well what he is doing. He has no clear vision of himself, no sense of his own existence, nor can he speak, but he acts by feeling. And I have no control at all. I have awareness, but no control - do you understand me at all? If he disappeared, he would take everything with him. I know he will crush me, maybe I will even go to prison because of him, but I don't think he makes mistakes. He does not repent, because he cannot, and it never even occurs to me to repent for him. He doesn't even know whether he is right or wrong, and even if he did, I think he still would not repent. Perhaps he would feel sadness and regret, as I once did, but he would not repent, nor is it necessary. How can someone repent for what he is, when he did not choose to be that way - and even if he had chosen it, what is the point, when he cannot change it? Repentance would only make sorrow and bitterness grow, and who knows what kind of monster would be born from that.

For me, there is no repentance here, no one who knows how or who would be entitled to forgive. As if I needed forgiveness from some man! As if I needed the pitying face of a coward who would so gladly strangle his wife and her five-minute hair treatment, and her nervous nail-biting, and her lover, the music professor with transplanted hair, and the refined white cat - he would do all that if there were no law to pursue him and no neighbors to despise him. And such a nobody, such a coward, is supposed to stand above me, to look at me with a furrowed brow, with concern he will forget in half an hour, and say: 'There, I forgive you because you did something we all sometimes wish for. I, and only I, forgive you. There, I am better than you. I wish that tomorrow you may become like me, if you succeed, if you try hard enough, if you are good and worthy of such greatness.'

What right does anyone have to forgive me, or my other face, or anyone at all, when he is the same? Let him take his forgiveness with him, and let him think above whom he will raise his bald head in imagined superiority!"

“You see yourself that I cannot be judged so easily. But that doesn’t worry me. When the time comes, I will distance myself from all of you and spend my life in solitude and boredom. It is all arranged the way it should be, and that no longer troubles me. As long as I don’t end up in prison, as long as I don’t do something terrible like I sometimes feel I might, everything will resolve itself. That other face, that second head, isn’t really the problem. The problem is that… what you called my third face. It isn’t even a spirit - it’s an animal. That animal, that dog’s face, appears only when it feels fear. It neither thinks nor feels - it only fears. It’s the devil’s companion, a trained servant. That head, that face… I’ll tell you something terrible - it sees and hears something strange…”

“What does it see?” Jana asked.

“It sees hell,” he whispered, lowering his head. Darkness filled his gaze again. “I’m falling apart,” he muttered quietly through clenched teeth, rubbing his hands together to calm himself.

“Hallucinations, then… I have to leave,” Jana said, visibly frightened now. What terrified her was precisely this moment - Philip’s confession, the confirmation of her suspicions. Until then, she had still hoped she had been wrong about his psychosis.

“You won’t be coming back?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s understandable.”

“It is. Thank you for understanding,” she said, trying to calmly straighten the red dress she had put on inside out. She wrapped herself in her coat and, holding her lace stockings in one hand and leaving her lemonade untouched, fled from Philip’s room

without a trace, quickening her panicked steps and wishing to disappear as though she had never been there at all.

Triumph

It was the twentieth of November when, after two months, rain finally began to fall. The usually crowded provincial bar in the center of Shev was empty. Only three drunkards sat on the bar stools: the first hidden behind a thick black beard streaked with gray; the second in his late thirties; the third, Philip, moody and with an unreadable expression on his face. Besides this trio, whose posture and faces revealed that every day of their lives was the same, there was only one more couple in the bar - a couple that no longer loved each other and was bored. The monotony of the evening was broken only by the waitress's giggle and the sound of the coffee machine. Each minute resembled the previous one. A typical night out in Shev - the most boring thing in the world.

Then suddenly, a rain-soaked girl entered the cheap bar. She was blonde and slender, very beautiful and clearly out of place. She was alone, wearing a thin blouse and a flowing skirt. She had come into the shabby bar to escape the downpour. It was immediately obvious that she was dressed in the latest fashion, heavily made up, elegant, and poised - the kind usually seen in popular big-city nightclubs. She did not expect to meet a familiar face in a bar in Shev. Suddenly, she recognized Philip and approached him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, pulling him from his thoughts with a casual phrase.

"Diana? Is that you?" Philip was surprised by the extraordinary beauty of the girl he had met seven years earlier. He barely recognized her. She had become very attractive. He thought she probably wouldn't have noticed him under different circumstances, but that didn't matter. Knowing women and human nature in general, he quickly mastered his confusion and confidently replied:

“Just celebrating my birthday.”

“Right, I vaguely remember - November twentieth… wow, how long has it been? Seven years! You’ve aged. How old are you turning?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Ah, and you still haven’t married? You were always a lone wolf… no one was good enough for you? But look at me - it doesn’t matter. I haven’t seen you in ages. Tell me, besides getting wrinkles, losing your hair, and becoming an alcoholic, what’s new?”

“Nothing. I’ve been employed for a year. I have a girlfriend… Just out for a drink, I won’t stay long, have to get up early tomorrow,” he lied - or rather, he engaged in the empty conversation that was expected.

“I still can’t believe it. You’re not as handsome as before. Time caught up with you, cousin. But you still have that… how should I put it…” Diana hesitated, while her eyes took on that familiar expression Philip knew so well in women.

“Say it.”

“There’s something in you - so masculine, strong, attractive. I’m sure it would radiate from you even if you weren’t handsome, like it still does now, making women helpless. I really don’t know what that force is or how you do it, but even now, after seven years, I, like this… I can still tremble like a little girl…”

“A gift from the devil,” he replied coldly.

“Nice… So what else did you get for your birthday?” she continued skillfully, like a cat playing with its prey. Philip already knew what would follow. Whenever he told a woman that his life was settled and happy, they would, out of some spiteful impulse, become desirous and want to crush that harmony which irritated them. Taking what belonged to someone else - such a delightful pastime. In moments of their petty malice and dissatisfaction, women would suddenly grow very close to him.

“Do you want me to show you?”

Philip stood up, calmly pushed his chair back into place, and walked out into the rain without looking back. Diana silently followed him. The two figures walked the entire way in silence. They spoke their first dry words only once they reached his apartment.

“Why did you reject me back then, seven years ago?” she asked, fixing him with a look of old disappointment. He burst into laughter.

“Don’t tell me that still bothers you?”

“If only I knew the reason…” she lowered her eyes and slowly unbuttoned her wet blouse, letting her rain-soaked blonde curls slip down over her bare shoulders. “Am I not attractive enough for you?” Her gaze then grew confident and heated again, while her pale, bare breasts swelled, revealing maturity, fullness, and merciless feminine hunger. He realized he had never seen a more beautiful woman. Her blouse slipped down her slender waist on its own, and her hand, guided by some uncontrolled impulse, moved along Philip’s stomach, down to his thighs. But there she found the unexpected answer to the question that concerned her, and her palm filled with limp, soft flesh.

“Ah, why did you have to drink so much?! Look what’s happened to you!” the frowning girl cried. The body of the pale goddess, mad with passion and blinded by power, finally ignited with suppressed insecurity.

“I had one drink. Maybe I’m not attracted to you,” he replied with pure malice.

Her resentful gaze was ready to devour him like a poisonous spider. She was furious with helplessness and humiliation that, after so much time and effort, had repeated itself beyond all logic. Her small revenge had failed. What man was powerful enough to resist? What man was mad enough not to want her now - so beautiful, graceful, fragrant, skilled in the games of love? And indeed, even if he had seen through her intention to finally break him, to crush his settled life, to humiliate the only noble feeling he still possessed - his feeling for the woman who, more than she, deserved to be loved by him - how could he remain physically cold?

"I'm leaving, Philip," she forced through clenched teeth, trying not to break from frustration.

"Where are you going now, dear?" he asked, seemingly calm. His mood had changed drastically within half an hour. He was no longer quiet and composed. His throat tightened, his forehead damp with some strange tension and force. His gaze became dark, and his voice deeper and gloomier.

"Where are you going on a night like this…," he sang through laughter, then suddenly grew serious. "Don't you know the night is dangerous? Of course you don't - girls like you know nothing. For you, the night is a calm blue veil that lulls children to sleep like a plush blanket with warmth and stars. You don't know - you don't know what the night does to some children! You don't know where the devil hides, nor what the night does to those punished without guilt! You're just an ordinary fool!"

Philip's voice trembled noticeably now, and his eyes filled with blood. He was shouting. He looked at her blankly, soullessly, like a villain. She realized she should be afraid, but her body did not obey. It remained proud and angry.

"You're sick," she said coldly.

Philip's rage seemed to find its trigger. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her onto the bed. Shouting insults without order, he struck her several times, then stepped back. She struggled up and began to cry.

"I wanted to spare you from me, I wanted to protect you. But no, you asked for it yourself. You were persistent, sweet, and wonderful. You were so devoted, you even became beautiful - not just beautiful, but the most beautiful. You wanted to take my soul more than the black devil himself. Do you know how disgusting you are? Do you? You - you who think you're doing someone a favor with all that pretense - you're filth, worse than the boldest thief. Ah, at least he says: I stole! And the devil at least says: I am what I am. But you - you're bankers, treacherous wretches who charge interest on your false kindness so filthy that all my pain wouldn't be enough to repay the debt of your calculated sacrifice. Yes, if I became something else, something better, with you and beside you, you would say you made me what I am, and I would have to pay you for the rest of my life. I wouldn't even be able to die without settling accounts with you. You don't want to love - you're not ready to give - you only want to possess! Cursed vultures! Who are you to whimper? Why should anyone pity you - you, who only want to dominate, to feed on the corpse of another's soul?! Stop! Stop!"

He shouted uncontrollably. In a surge of furious rage, he grabbed a pistol from the top shelf, rushed toward her, and began dragging her by the hair, waving the weapon. Her quiet sob turned into loud crying. He pressed the black barrel against her temple.

"I told you to stop!" he kept shouting.

The girl suddenly froze with fear and fell silent obediently. In the new silence, only Philip's restless breathing and trembling agitation could be heard. He paused for several seconds, then moved the barrel away from her temple, leaving a red mark on her hot, sweaty forehead. Still blinded by rage, he stepped away from the crying victim, her breasts exposed, and hissed through his teeth:

"Go."

Diana did not waste a single moment. Bare-breasted, she rushed through the door and ran down the street. The madman, swollen with unsatisfied murderous impulse, knocked over the writing desk and then kicked the papers and pencils that scattered across the room. Out of control, he rushed into the yard and stopped in front of the dog's pen, where the animal looked at him indifferently. Resting its head on its front paws, the dog lay motionless, reacting only with pupils turned upward.

Philip aimed the pistol at the dog and fired. The first shot hit its leg. The animal whimpered in pain. The next shot lodged in its forehead. The animal's eyes widened, and it lay still.

The pressure in his forehead and the unrest within him still did not subside. He felt no relief after giving in to his madness. The blood of the animal, flowing in a thin stream, did not satisfy the hunger. Something inside him wanted to kill a human being. As he watched the warm pool of death, trying to suppress the urge that made him sweat constantly, he did not notice that someone in the neighboring house had turned on the light.

A middle-aged man stepped out of the house. He stopped on the threshold, looking at the dead animal, then at the trembling hand of his tenant, holding the weapon in madness.

"For God's sake, man, what are you doing?!" the confused old man shouted. Philip flinched. He remained silent.

"I asked you something, what are you doing?! Do you want the police here?! Do you want to wake half the neighborhood?!" the old man repeated.

Philip felt another surge of rage. His breathing turned into a rasp. Sweat flooded his eyes, which burned unbearably. He lifted his bloodshot gaze toward his landlord, growling in raw fury. He no longer wanted to control himself. The force that gripped him pounded like his restless heart, and he raised his right hand toward the frowning old man.

The bullet shot through the barrel and struck the old man in the left breast. Human blood was dark, spraying in thick streams.

Philip remained frozen in place for several seconds, staring at the liquid spurting from the ruptured aorta. Awareness began to return to his blinded temples, and with awareness came fear. He ran down the street, racing toward the bridge and the quiet Shev lake.

Everything around him seemed unfamiliar and uniform. Every woman, every family, every star to which he had never managed to find purpose or meaning, every fickle beauty - everything, everything seemed so ridiculous and insignificant compared to the blackout of consciousness. His darkness was his alone; it was maladjusted, evil, and destructive, yet strong and certain. If only there were no dull rules of this ridiculous, forced civilization, his darkness would rule the world. For his evil was not evil - it was just, because it was sincere. Truth is justice. If everyone let their devil out of the prison of self-control and imposed rules, would they not all be like him? Were they not all mad Philips, only wearing masks of overrated ideals, believing in nonexistent happiness, choking childishly over the invention called love? How many selfish husbands would kill their coquettish wives, how many restless mothers would abandon their children, how many secretly infatuated boys would attack their unfortunate classmates?

“You lie, all of you lie. There is only chaos. And the devil - I’ve seen him. Everything else you invented so that only the chosen could steal, those who steal deliberately; so that murder would become punishment for those who break your laws instead of the pure, accidental order of nature; so that the wolf would be condemned for being a wolf and for being hungry. You eat when you’re hungry - why can’t I? Why can’t I be like everyone else?” he thought.

He ran faster and faster, choking from exhaustion and rage. Wherever he turned, he saw only the frowning finger of judgment. The world was not his refuge, and so they hated each other.

He fled at a run to the shore of the Shev lake. At half past four in the morning, the shore was empty and safe. They would not find him there. He sat on the muddy sand and inhaled the cold air carried by the wind from the water. The colors of the sky calmed him, and he felt fatigue overcome him. But just as his eyelids closed, the water carried an unusual sound of malicious laughter.

Philip understood.

It was him.

“What do you want from me?!” he shouted uncontrollably. This time, the devil did not appear with fiery eyes, but only as an indistinct voice that soon deepened and became authoritative and sharp:

“Nothing, you wretch! What do you think - that I need you, that I gain something from your squirming, from your childish firecracker-shooting at mangy mutts and old men? People die every day - unnecessarily, bizarrely, and completely idiotically! I already rule this world; there is no corner of the earth where you can escape me. Do you think you are special, evil, or fierce? You are an ordinary hawk, an ordinary rat satisfying your ridiculous urges and shallow interests in such a predictable way. You are no different from others. They are all like that, every one of them - or will become so, carried along by the order of the sick and defeated. They are losing their god, losing guilt and mercy; they refuse to acknowledge their sins, they belittle goodness, and they desire chaos, pleasure in blood, and reckless hedonism. No one asks the price. They think it is enough to deny me, to laugh at both God and the devil, and that guilt will mostly disappear. My time has come - a time when even the wise grow dull because they no longer have strength, when even the good lose their ideals. The time has come for doubt in man’s sense of guilt and his will for goodness. The time of judgment has come. And no, you are nothing special - you are only a reflection of humanity’s gallop into hell, one of the first. Soon they will all become like you. They have lost faith in good forces, and they will be like you - mad, violent, and, most importantly, weak. I don’t need you! You are not unique for being first. I don’t even know why I chose you - perhaps for amusement. Or because I had to choose someone. I drew you from a hat at random - there are all the reasons for your suffering.”

“Leave me if you don’t need me! Leave me alone!” Philip screamed at the devil. “I’m not afraid of you. I will die, and I’m not afraid.”

“You lie. Your face is pale with fear. You tremble like a twig, like a dying dog, like an abandoned boy. You won’t be rid of me - and do you know why? Because you don’t even want to. You don’t even know how to be anything but a hawk, a rat, a snarling frightener of women and children - or whatever you want to call it. You won’t die either - that’s another lie! You all lie. But the most frightening thing isn’t that you lie - it’s that you believe yourselves. Ridiculous, schizophrenic world - how easy it is to conquer you!”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Philip repeated, terrified. He is real - he is real! Madness was no longer enough to explain what was happening. The devil’s voice dissolved again into irritating laughter, then slowly began to fade.

Philip began to cry. He could no longer endure it. Fear drained from him even the last trace of humanity.

The Split

Around ten in the morning, Philip's body lay in a numb fever on the very shore of the lake. That was where the police found him. They watched his bluish lips barely moving and his hands defensively pushing away something that, to them, did not exist. His fingers cut through the air. His eyes were pale blue in the sunlight, almost white, only his wide pupils gaping with dark terror. Two confused young men in blue police uniforms looked at him, unsure what to do. The inspector stepped a few paces aside. Philip alternated between panic and sluggish surrender, forcing through his teeth words that could not be understood.

The inspector cautiously approached the patient. "This isn't good," he said. "This kid isn't our job."

When the ambulance finally arrived - a good half hour late, as was customary in Caledonia - Philip had almost completely given in. His body was lifeless and without strength. He heard the screams of hell and smelled its acidic fumes, like sulfur and vinegar. A medical orderly with strong, hairy arms dragged him toward the stretcher. He lifted his eyelids and examined the whites of his eyes. Philip's blue eyes were so frozen and pale that it was impossible to tell where the sclera ended and the lens began. Only his pupils were wide and dark. Through them flashed images of fiery eyes. The smell of sulfur made him stop breathing at moments. Finally, he lost consciousness.

The orderly addressed the police: "There's blood on his clothes."

"Dog's blood," the inspector nodded. "He killed the dog first, then the landlord."

"He's headed straight for Saint Nicholas Hospital," the orderly commented, pushing the stretcher into the vehicle. He then sat in the passenger seat and sighed deeply. He felt gloomy and weary.

He looked at the handsome young man tied to the stretcher and found him familiar. Then he remembered having met Philip once. He remembered how smart and talented he had been, how he had shone wherever he went. He remembered how everyone liked him - at least until the party ended and everyone went home. Then they would fall asleep,

rocked in their comfortable cradles, forgetting about him. And no one, truly no one, could have imagined that this man would end up in Saint Nicholas Hospital.

The orderly nudged his colleague with his elbow and said, “I knew this one, Marin. He had promise. It’s a shame, I’m telling you… a real shame.”

The driver remained silent and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” Marin asked while turning the keys, “what did they say - when are they going to fix the heating?”

“They say it’s too expensive. The people from the city administration are taking another foreign loan - a hundred thousand.”

“And there’s no money for heating?”

“Apparently not,” he said, opening the window.

“Bunch of crooks! I knew I shouldn’t have voted for the Social Democrats,” Marin hissed nervously.

“Then why did you vote for them?”

“Well… God knows,” he shrugged. “You had to vote for someone.”

“That poor guy in the back would be a better example for city hall than that Anton. Anton’s giving statements to the newspapers now - wants to nominate Shev for Capital of

Culture, and poor Shev, like some African backwater, hasn't heard of culture except in a bar."

"And there's no heating either."

"No heating, Marin."

"Poor Shev with them."

"Come on, Marin - drive this poor fellow before he kills us too. If I end up up there in heaven, I won't care about Anton or Shev."

Philip was immediately taken to the locked ward of the hospital. They tied him to the bed throughout the night after administering Haldol Depo intravenously. In the morning he was conscious and remembered the terrifying images that had tormented him. He did not doubt his vision. It had certainly been the devil, and that acidic smell that burned his nostrils - that was unmistakably the smell of hell.

He stared for a long time at the sunny day through the window of the locked ward and cried. He noticed no one. The medical staff did not come to him. Around noon he sat on the bed and thought for a long time about classical music, about his old painter friend, about Sophia's shaggy curls, about Jana, about his insignificance to those people. Yes, he was completely insignificant to everyone - except those he had hurt. That, too, was a clear mark of the devil. He had played for the wrong team, and now there was no going back. It was pointless to repent for something that would surely repeat itself if there were ever a chance to turn time back.

Around two o'clock he fell asleep for a while and dreamed something unusual. He dreamed of himself sitting in that same room in the locked hospital ward, reading a holy book. He was reading and crying like a helpless child. Through the window, a girl with sad black eyes watched him and screamed. In that heavy dream, he noticed the skin on her thighs tearing.

“I’m not doing this to you! It’s not my fault!” he shouted, but she did not listen and could not hear him because of the pain. He kept shouting, but the young woman’s beautiful, gentle face was falling apart, her skin peeling and rotting on her, while she was still alive.

“Don’t cry…” he repeated now in a numb whisper, “I didn’t want to… I had no control… don’t cry, please… don’t… cry…”

Suddenly, in the dream, the holy book appeared again in his hands. He read it calmly. He did not notice that the floor beneath his feet was breaking. The tiles cracked and the fissure widened. An abyss opened, dark and unavoidable. The black void spread and prepared to swallow him…

Philip woke in terror.

Around five in the afternoon he was admitted to Dr. Marija Pavlova. Pavlova was familiar with cases similar to this one, but she still did not dare draw conclusions too quickly. She offered him a seat. She gave him a cigarette despite the obvious ban on smoking. She did not smile or show sadness. The tone of her voice was always even, and her movements calm. Her behavior resembled that of a skilled trainer approaching a frightened animal.

“You were frightened at that moment, weren’t you?” she asked.

“Actually, I wasn’t. I don’t know why I wanted to kill. I just felt like killing.”

“I understand.”

“Can I go?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“No, I’m sorry. But you can stay silent if you want.”

“What will happen now?” he asked her. “Will you lock me up?”

“Another cigarette?” Pavlova offered, skillfully avoiding the answer.

He lit a cigarette. He stood up and walked to the window. He looked at the sun through the dusty hospital glass and wished he were outside now, free. He wished to play basketball, to stroll slightly drunk along the asphalt streets of Shev at Saturday dawn. He flicked the ash when it occurred to him that this would never happen again.

“You know, I’m not needed by God.”

“Why do you think that?”

“You see, he has completely rejected me. The devil has taken me under his wing, gave me the soul of a three-headed dog. Now I serve him. It has to be that way, and I have no influence over it. But then why this grief, why this terrible grief for her? It hurts so much! She hurts me. I don’t care about that landlord, even if I killed him, I would have just finished off some old man, who knows what he did in his life. He was a failed old bearded man, but she…”

“Who is she?” Dr. Pavlova asked perceptively.

And there Philip began his story.

The Confession of Cerberion

He began to speak vaguely, somewhere from the middle. Starting from the beginning would have been too painful for him. He already felt his heart being pierced. Physically, his body could not withstand the intensity of the fear caused by the hallucinations, and the weakness of his heart and body had noticeably worsened. Even then, he felt uneasy at the thought that Pavlova might ask him about his mother. Pavlova, however, remained silent.

"Her name was Ivana," he said. "A common name, ordinary, pleasant, easy to remember, and even easier to forget. She looked exactly as you usually imagine someone named Ivana. Blonde, light-eyed, with a very modern face and a full figure. In short, a beauty. Light and cheerful like a summer Sunday, yet with a very bourgeois and dignified bearing. Exactly one of those girls who never lose their composure, who have perfect boyfriends and perfect marriages, after an equally perfect darkness under which they hide their youthful adventures. Everything comes easily to them, everything runs smoothly. But I'm talking too much…

The key and at the same time very irritating trait of such girls is the ease with which they achieve their petty, spoiled goals. Mother and father bought a new dress, and she suddenly wants some provincial boy to tear that dress. Not because the provincial is the most handsome at that moment, but because he is mysterious, sad, wounded. So why shouldn't she wound him even more? Back then I didn't see girls like her as naive little monkeys, I was actually afraid of them. Probably because I felt their power. I looked at her and saw a praying mantis. Even though she tried very hard to be especially pleasant. And she was, she was polite, measured, even educated. She was perfect. I watched her, so light, ready to flutter away, unaware of the damage she deepened, unaware of the ugliness of her best intentions, carefree like a forest fairy - and I hated her.

She admired my beauty. She even said that 'beauty will save the world.' I looked at her in surprise and commented, 'Oh really? Who told you that?'

'An Apollo,' she answered without the slightest confusion.

‘My dear,’ I said contemptuously, while hatred burned in my throat like acid, ‘his name isn’t Apollo, but Asmodeus [the demon of lust].’

She didn’t know what I was talking about. She was very young, perhaps seventeen; it would have been unrealistic to expect that she had read so much. She sat motionless, devouring me with those warm blue eyes. I swallowed saliva hot as embers while already devising my vile intentions. I was working out ways to vent my hatred on her. For a moment I reconsidered, and I was determined to go home and control myself, but she kept looking at me - with that look.

You know the one. That look.

I clearly recognized that look in women. I sensed it unfailingly every time. It was the gaze of a warrior and of a terrible, dreadful hunger for power. It was the desire to give pleasure in order to inflict pain. Each of those gentle, beautiful, blue-eyed creatures, beside a worthy man, would find herself in a position to feel the ghostly hunger I speak of. And do not deceive yourselves, it is not hunger for his body, nor a sign that she desires flesh. It is hunger for domination and victory. Not one of those fragile beings stopped at the body. Each was like a demon, desiring first and only the soul.

It is strange, and at the same time terribly repulsive, that women are not even aware of that warrior within them who only wishes to conquer. For thousands of years they have called those deceptions, wars, and betrayals love. And all that time, while doing cruel things, they believe they are doing something noble and right. And we, we allow it, aware that it cannot be otherwise, because we are too low, too dirty, and too foolish for anything better. And we are so repulsive that we cannot even imagine anything better. Some resist, but those who resist are the real hypocrites. The worst is the one who resists a woman’s weaving of the lover’s web, and then, feigning sadness, delivers his final words:

“Don’t cry for me, my dear, I don’t deserve it. Someone will love you in a way that I, a failure and a scoundrel, never could…”

He says this, yet deep inside he rejoices: “You failed, you whore and damned creature, you failed with your seduction, with your sweet cherry pie, with tears of illusion, you didn’t get me.”

Most often, the whole game of love looks like this: nature demands its due and a man and woman notice each other. Desire draws them together, but desire is fickle like a water nymph, and it does not keep them. What keeps people together in a relationship, what you call exalted feelings, are in fact basenesses. They are calculations of human reason. Very soon, when the body and nature are satisfied, the accountant takes over. The woman counts:

“Ah, this male has a house in a nice suburb, a cottage, he finished university and works in the state administration, this could turn into something useful.”

He calculates in his own way:

“She’s attractive and good in bed, I could teach her to cook and make that excellent pie, I might as well marry her. It had to happen once, it happens to everyone. Better her than waiting a few more years and ending up with someone unpleasant. Besides, one can always have affairs on the side…”

Then begins the game of the fly and the spider. And in my case, with the beautiful blue-eyed Ivana, it was no different, except that my reason was already considerably clouded. I did not calculate. I did not even think. I only hated.

Suddenly, I remembered my childhood. I remembered the snakes that chased me in my dreams, the terrible nightmares in which the devil himself announced his coming. I was very young when I first dreamed of snakes. I was feverish with fear. And at that moment, with Ivana, I remembered that fever and felt as though I were reliving it. She was already running her thin fingers and red nails through my hair, and I was losing my breath.

I stood up and offered her my hand. She followed me without objection. I whispered to her about Asmodeus, that he was the demon of lust, that I was sure this demon must also have a female form, resembling some dreadful Egyptian deity, a seductive female body with the head of a spider that devours the male. I told her that in this century we had all become demons of lust, that we suck each other's blood and souls. I rambled like that, and she laughed. I was quite drunk and don't know what else I said. She did not understand anything, and only flashed her desirous eyes, which irritated me.

I led her into the park. When I was sure there was no one around, I lunged at her. I almost wished she would resist. She grew frightened and whispered, "But I didn't mean… it… like that."

"What did you mean?" I said, foam of rage at my lips. "That beauty will save the world? Beauty can only ruin the world! Virtue, virtue would save it! But we are all worse than the devil, and you, you who think you are better than me, you are the devil too."

"I… really… have to go," she said, now terrified.

Her departure, her thin frightened walk, her conviction that I was dreadful and that she should escape from me as quickly as possible, completely deranged me. Reason shut down and I lost control. I wanted power at any cost. I knocked her to the ground and struck her several times. She grew weak. She could not recover, and when she regained consciousness moments later, confusion pinned her in place. She did not resist at any moment.

When I finished, I still felt no calm. I stood up, emphasizing my height to assert even greater power over her body, dirty with mud and earth. Moonlight slid across her bruised stomach beneath the thin white blouse. Then something awakened in my mind. Despair, terrible despair, that is too small and low a word for what I felt then.

And since that moment I have tried to find God, but there is no God. That very night he forgot me, he abandoned me. And then he found me - the other one.

And the most interesting thing of all, I must admit, was that I completely reconciled with myself. I should have cursed myself, felt like a monster, and hated myself for it. But it wasn't like that. I recovered quickly, I even forgot. I fled the scene of the crime and never heard about Ivana again. Since there were no consequences for what I had done, I simply couldn't help but forget. I began living normally again, drinking, smoking, having fun. I loved girls and they loved me. I told no one, not because I felt remorse, but because I felt it might be shameful. And I am proud, too accustomed to being admired; I have no need to feel ashamed before anyone.

So I vented my hatred quite neatly. It seemed as though that strange thirst for power within me had been satisfied and that I was completely calm, until the beast grew hungry again.

But a few months later the nightmares appeared. This time they were not only snakes. They were abysses, dark spaces, black holes of the cosmos, and vague threats lurking within them. And finally, fiery eyes. They terrified me; I was at once horrified and frozen when I saw them, although it wasn't entirely clear whose eyes they were or why they frightened me. I began to hear the sound of nails scratching at the door of my room, giggles, and screams.

At the same time, however, something in my life pushed me to change my habits. I stopped drinking, slept a lot, and often went to the mountains. A quiet life and the mountain air calmed me, and the nightmares completely disappeared.

Until ten months ago.

I tell you, it was terrible when I began to dream of him again. Now it seemed to me that I knew whose those fiery eyes were and whose those claws were, and that they undoubtedly belonged to the same being. And to him! To him personally! I fainted from fear. I couldn't explain it. And even if I could, I knew no one would understand me. Everything lost its meaning. Everything except fear.

Of course, it was the illuminator. The devil. He came to me in dreams, with snakes and eyes of fire, and often, even when fully awake, I heard giggling and scraping. Suddenly, the black shapelessness of his body, those living eyes and jaws, entered reality. I saw him. He was on the street. He chased me like a dog. Then I saw him again several times. He had frog legs and parts of insects, he had the jaws of hideous beasts from Asian forests and the burning eyes of Africa. It seemed as if he contained something from every animal in the world, and yet, above all, he resembled a human being. On the shore, before they caught me, I spoke with him. After that, I remember nothing until I came here.

I know, I truly know that you cannot help me. I'm telling you this only because my life and my freedom are already finished. Locked up, I am locked up. So at least let me tell an interesting story. Do you find it interesting?" he asked.

When he received no answer from Pavlova, he continued:

"Do you know what is even more interesting? After everything, there was someone who loved me. Not with your distorted love, when the spider weaves its web to catch prey and establish power, but with some strange, rare love that sets no conditions. It was not like a woman. Even now I think she was only outwardly a woman. Inside, surely some kind of angel. But however it may be, let her be an angel. Even after her, I still managed to remain persistently dreadful. After her, I again tried to hurt a girl. Driven by the devil, knowing that the soul could not be saved, I felt that hatred again and gave in to it once more. I let that terrible impulse of mine run wild.

It was shortly before the murder. I had been drinking. I met a pretty, insignificant girl in a bar. I had known her before, casually, but that night she was more beautiful than ever. Still, I didn't desire her. I felt the same as I had that night. I took her to my apartment, and the three-headed dog inside me completely broke free from control. I don't know how it all happened, but something inside me knew it had to kill a man and that it would not calm down until it fulfilled its intention. It was one of my two heads over which I have no control…

Philip spoke for a long time about how he was like Cerberus. He explained the disorder within himself. The split in his soul. For him, the devil was real, and hell was

real, and not only that. Hell was his home. And he was completely certain that nothing, nothing could change his fate. It seemed to him that everything was predetermined and that no force could alter that path. He had already come to terms with it.

He spoke about sensing the acidic smell of sulfur, vinegar, and ammonia, but that he was slowly getting used to it. If we are already going to hell, he said, it is important that we all begin to grow accustomed to those smells. He explained that at first they are unpleasant, but if you breathe them long enough, you get used to them.

Dr. Pavlova's face was pale and furrowed.

The End

Snow had already piled high when Mihael Jasenovski arrived at the Shev psychiatric ward. Red-faced and stiff from the cold, he shook frost and snowflakes from his hair and grabbed the first person he saw who looked like staff. He was beside himself. The forty-year-old woman he had seized noticed this and smiled warmly.

"I'm a cleaner, you see?" she said, showing him a metal bucket filled with water and a sponge.

Mihael said nothing. Everything blurred before his eyes and he could not speak.

"I'll take you to Dr. Pavlova," she said kindly and led him down the corridor.

Dr. Pavlova was gazing sadly through the window at the black trees and the snow that would not stop falling. Frost crept along the window frame, and the cold made the skin prickle. Mihael sat down without a word and began blowing into his fists to warm his hands. Dr. Pavlova turned from the window and looked at him questioningly.

"I heard about the suicide… here… yesterday…" Mihael Jasenovski began to stammer.

"Yes, yes, Philip. He killed himself last night. We tried to reach his family, but we couldn't find them. We called the girl, Jana, whom he claimed to know, but her number is no longer in service. So, in a way, it's fortunate you found out by chance…" the doctor replied.

"Shev is a small place, everything becomes known quickly. And what… what happened? He always spoke strangely, and he was flat and gloomy, but I couldn't imagine he'd end like that. And I enrolled in psychology!" Mihael said, rubbing his temples as if trying to drive away a headache.

“It’s not your fault. Nor his. Many illnesses of that nature end this way. Homicidal, suicidal, destructive in any case. He was… a dreadful man. I don’t know whether having no one close to him was the cause or the consequence of that dread.”

“Both,” Mihael replied.

“You know, sometimes I think about what would happen if we were all just and able to recognize value. Then everyone would give their best in some ideal world, and we would already have found cures for illnesses of this kind. Miracles are possible; their sources are everywhere around us. We simply don’t know how to discover them, and we are too vain to create a world in which the best people would stand out and uncover them. There would already be all kinds of cures if there weren’t so many petty mediocrities,” Dr. Pavlova said dreamily.

“Yes, I used to dream about that too.”

“I’ve been working for twenty years, and cases like this still shake me. Always, always you think it could have been different, if only…”

“If only… what?” he asked.

“If only… I don’t know. If we were better people.”

Mihael rubbed his forehead, frowning, his face tightening under the weight of so many deaths. He felt sick. For a moment he even thought it might be better that Philip had taken that step so early, while he still had friends who could cross themselves for him a few times. Though he knew well enough that it would not be of much use. Especially now.

He asked Dr. Pavlova about the details of Philip's illness and decided to pay for the funeral, not even knowing why, or what meaning it had now. The only thing that would make sense now would be to learn from mistakes, to prevent such chaos from happening again, especially on the back of a small town like Shev in the poor country of Caledonia. But that was all just fantasy. The world and its people would remain the same, full of petty mediocrities, as Dr. Pavlova had put it.

Still, he would cross himself. Perhaps it was worth something. Perhaps, after losing faith in the world, it was worth believing at least in the soul.

Mihael was pulled from his thoughts by the thud of a book hitting the doctor's desk. Still confused and pale, he watched her scrape a freshly killed red cockroach nearly an inch long from the book's cover. Holding the insect's antennae, smeared with slime, above the trash bin, Dr. Pavlova muttered with disgust:

"Damn cockroaches! We'll never get rid of them. Never."